



Luminary of the Stars

A KAITO MOMOTA ZINE

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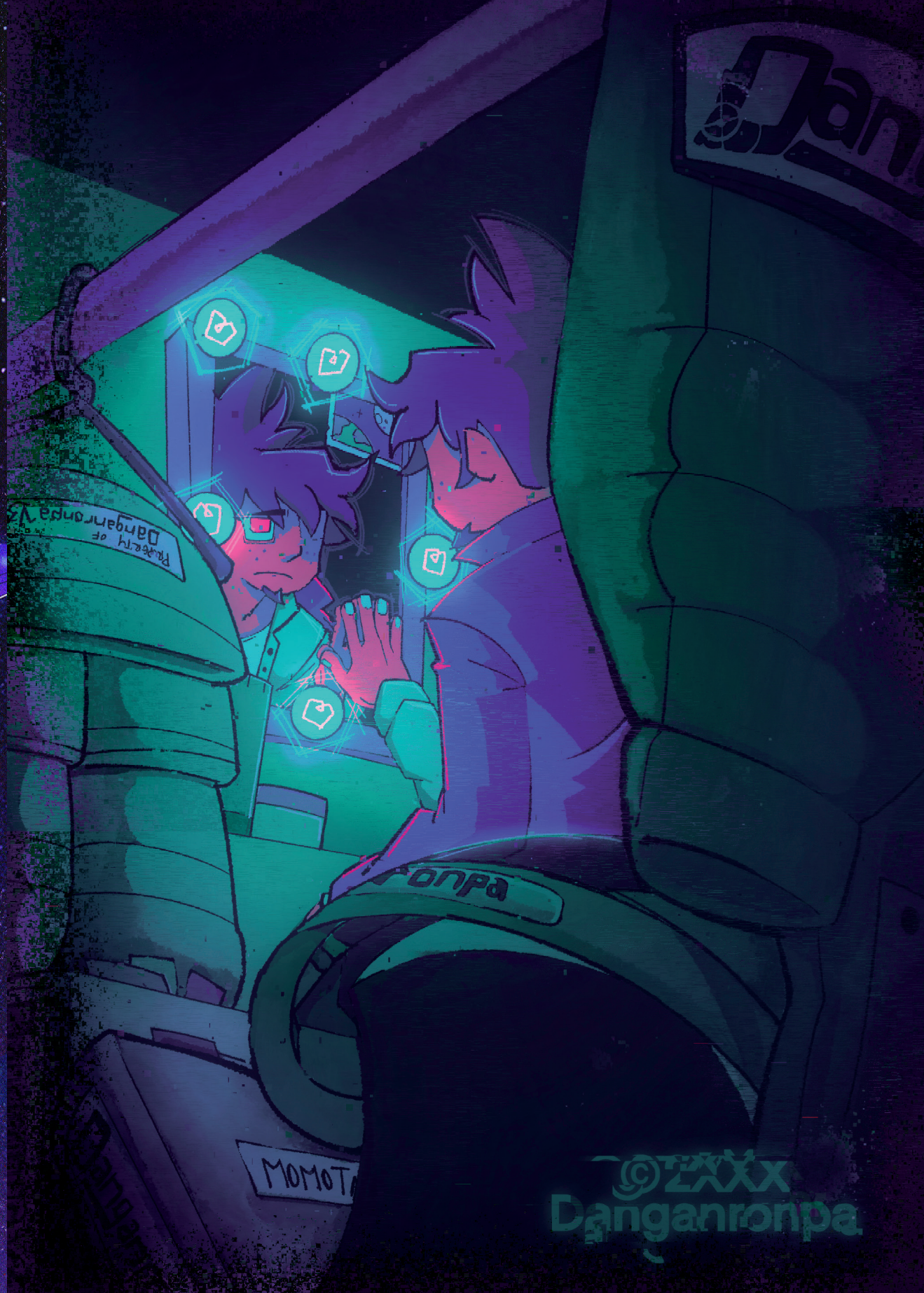
An unofficial fanbook

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Tall Tales on the Seven Seas

Written by Jimcloud | Art by Noodle

So there I was, on the bow of my ship, the wind blowing and the rain pouring down my face. This storm was ugly, and I mean *ugly*. Even its mother wouldn't kiss it on the mouth. I had to wipe my eyes every other second just to see what's in front of me. But that wasn't enough to stop me! I had to keep my ship going in the right direction, or we were *never* going to find the lost city!

But it wasn't as if nature was just gonna roll over and hand me the win. Nuh-uh. So I had to reach up and furl the sails. This nasty little guy wasn't gonna let them come out unharmed if *it* had anything to say about it. I trusted in my climbing skills, though! It was easy to hop up onto the rigging and—

I pause the story, my eyes widening. “Wha-!? Rantaro!”

“Hi,” Rantaro greets, hanging off the rigging like some kinda monkey, raising an eyebrow at me. “Sorry, am I in your way? I can move real fast.”

“Yeah, if you don't mind, dude. You're kinda on my ropes.” He drops off, and I clear my throat before I get back to business.

Okay, where was I? Right, right, the rigging. So I hopped up on top of it, just like that, no problem at all. Sure, the wind was getting the rain in my eyes, and I was soaked down to the bone, but those are only minor problems when you're a hero like me! It was no problem at all to get up to the sail and get her all furled up, *juuuust* like that.

“Huh,” Rantaro says, from down on the decks, “like, from the mast? Most ships I've been on, you can furl the sails from the deck. It's a little inconvenient otherwise.”

“What? Really?” C'mon, Kaito, an excuse. You need an excuse. “...Well, this is my special ship, so it's a little bit different.” I flash a thumbs up at Rantaro. “I get why you'd be confused, though! Don't worry about it.”

Back to it, then.



Okay, okay, let's move ahead a little with the story. We got through those nasty waters no problem, but without any wind, we weren't getting anywhere. But then I got an idea. You wouldn't need wind to run a ship if you had something moving it for you! Like a sea serpent. And as luck would have it, one of those was attacking us at just that moment. It was a real nasty one, too. Dozens of scars running up and down it, teeth the size of my forearm, and its breath was nothing to sniff at either! For anyone else, that might have been a setback! But not for Kaito Momota, Luminary of the Stars!

So, all I had to do was lash this thing to my boat and figure out a way to steer it. The first part was gonna be easy! We had plenty of spare rope to go around, after all. All I had to do was leap off the bow of the ship onto the head of the thing, and from there I could just get the rope all tied up on its mouth. Its head was thrashing around, bucking and heaving, but I knew I could get up there and hold on. All it took was a nice, heroic—

“Rantaro!”

Rantaro blinks up at me from the top of the sea serpent's head, where he's laying down. “Oh. Sorry. Am I in the way again? This spot just seemed cozy. I'm listening, I promise.”

I'm about to open my mouth to say *yes*, obviously, but... “You're kinda in the way, but you seem pretty comfortable. You don't gotta move or nothin'. Why don't we move on to the next part of the story?”

Okay. So after a while, I got the serpent working for me. It wasn't a huge challenge. Turns out she really liked those peanut butter cracker snacks, the ones you get in the plastic. So I just kept her fed, and she was more than happy to carry us! I ended up calling her Polaris. Polaris knew the way to the hidden continent we were looking for.

“Which is where the lost city was?” Rantaro asks, from Polaris's back.

I flash Rantaro another thumbs up. “Exactly! You get an A+ for listening, dude.”

So with Polaris guiding us, we were well on our way, and just *speeding* through the water. Whole knots were flying by us! Like, uh, nautical knots, the knots we tied Polaris up with were fine. At the rate we were going, we were bound to hit the island within a day. Maybe even less.

Rantaro perks up, leaning over the side and dropping off Polaris entirely. “The island continent? Is this, like, an Australia kind of situation?”

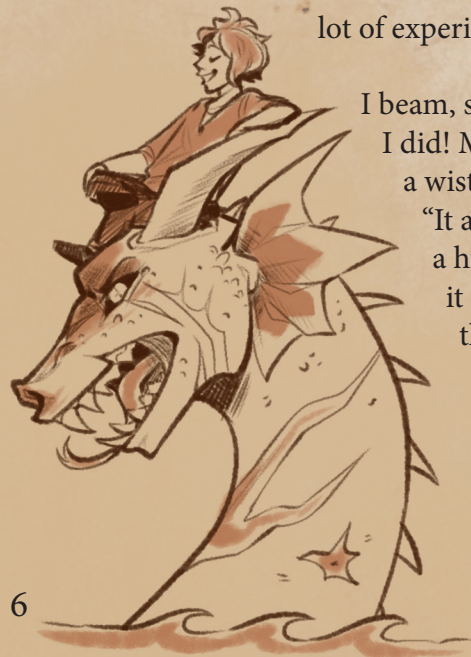
Why does Rantaro know exactly the wrong questions to ask? I clear my throat. “Uh, yeah, definitely! That’s not the point right now, though.”

The *point* is, everything was going great, but right as the sun started to set, the roar of cannonfire sounded! It was none other than my arch rival, who had a sea serpent tied up to *his* boat, too! Which was *so* annoying, by the way. Get your own idea, man!

Anyway, my rival was firing on my ship. His cannonball whizzed right past my head! He always was a good shot with that thing. It was a warning shot, for sure. A challenge. We’d both been after the lost city, you see. I sailed out first, but I knew it was only a matter of time before he caught up to me! That’s what any good rival does, after all.

“I didn’t know that,” Rantaro comments, as he climbs up the playse—the *mast*. “I’ve never had a rival, though. Sounds like you had a lot of experience with this sort of thing.”

I beam, shooting a thumb at my chest. “Of course I did! My rival and I went *waaay* back.” I let out a wistful sigh before I start to recount the story. “It all started one fateful day, when we got into a huge shooting competition! We came out of it tied, and we *had* to settle the score. Since then, we’ve been competing with each other about everything. Or, well... we used to. I wonder what that guy’s up to these days?”



Man. Those really were the days. What I wouldn’t give to meet him one last time, settle the score for real. Oh, I should totally tell Rantaro about—

Wait, right, right! I was explaining the lost city fight! So there we were. His cannonball had *just* whizzed by my head. I knew he meant business. But I couldn’t have him trashing my ship! He was always pretty good at long range combat. So I needed an edge. I reached into my pocket for my trusty peanut butter cracker package, and *whoosh!* I tossed it into the sea. Now, Polaris knew just what that was about. She leapt for it, swimming so fast, until our boat and my rival’s were neck and neck! From there, it was easy to cut off a rope and swing right over to his ship!

“It’s just you and me, now,” I’d said, unsheathing my sword and pointing it right at him, “no more tricks or games.”

He just smiled at that. “That’s right,” he’d agreed, as he pulled out his own. “And that means I’ve got you right where I want you.”

It was quiet, then. Just the two of us, the sun setting to our sides. Polaris and my rival’s snake were watching in awe, waiting for the moment when it would all start. All it’d take is one second, and our swords would crash against each other. Just the slightest movement. Just. One...

“Whoa!” Rantaro lets out a cry, his grip on the top of the playset slipping. My legs are moving before I can think about it.

“Rantaro!” He’s falling by the time I get the word out. I don’t have any time to think about it. I just lunge, reach my arms out, and the feeling of his weight on my arms tells me I managed something.

And then all I can think about is the shitty, shitty taste of rubber tire chunks in my mouth.

“Sorry about that,” Rantaro says, rolling off my arms as I spit rubber out, “I thought my grip was a little more secure than it was. Should’ve been more careful.”



“Hey, don’t—” I pause to choke, spitting more tire out and sticking out my tongue. *Bleh*. That’s the worst taste. It’s just the worst.

Rantaro sits himself up and stares down at me. “Don’t?” he prompts, before holding a hand up for me. I don’t need it, but I take it anyway, and he gets me sitting in no time.

“Don’t worry about it,” I finish. I scrub my tongue with the side of my finger for a sec before I let it back in my mouth. “At least they added these used tires. Used to be you scraped your knees and you just lived with it.”

“You must’ve been very brave,” Rantaro says. He picks himself up, dusting all the rubber off his pants before airing out his shirt. “I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything less from someone like you, huh?”

Rantaro’s words give me the pep I need to hop *right* up on my feet. “You bet!” I shout. “It’s all in a day’s work for the Luminary of the Stars!”

Just as I move to pound my fists together, some used tire drops from my hair onto my hands. It’s not the most awesome declaration I’ve had. We’ll work on it.

Rantaro reaches over and flicks the tire shred off my hand, a smile on his face. “Thanks for bringing me by here and telling me all your stories. I especially liked the one about the sea serpent.”

He nods back towards the playset, where one of the toy dragon statues we climbed all over is sitting. He even remembered which one was Polaris. I’m kinda impressed.

“Of course! Anybody would be happy to hear stories about my greatness.” I pause after that, though, letting out a quiet sigh and rubbing my upper lip with a finger. “But, uh... thanks for listening, too, man. You’re pretty good at it, anybody ever tell you that?”

It’s not the most Luminary thing I’ve said, but I think I made it work.

“Once or twice,” Rantaro says, climbing up onto the playset again to sit. This is how he keeps falling into the tires. “You know, if we ever both have the time, you should bring me this way again.”



“Huh?” I can’t help being surprised by that one. “I mean, there ain’t a lot to see this way.”

Rantaro shakes his head. “It’s not really about the playground. I just think it adds something to your stories when you tell them. You start running around the place, pulling all kinds of stunts. It makes me feel like I’m really there, you know?”

“Psh,” I scoff, “you’re just saying that.”

Rantaro waves his hands in front of him. “No, no! I really mean it. And I want to hear what happened with you and your rival. Who made it to the lost city?”

I don’t respond at first, glancing over towards the setting sun. It’s getting a little bit late, but... not so late that I’ve gotta leave this story untold, huh. I grin, hopping up onboard the ship beside Rantaro and getting back to the story.

So, there we were, just him and me, on the deck of his ship. There was no doubt. This was going to be the duel of our lives...





BLASTOFF

The Impossible Is Possible!



Self Esteem

Written by Lakesandquarries | Art by Trillmunch

Kaito's on the balcony, head slumped over. He hasn't styled his hair for a week, has barely left his hospital room, and has avoided his classmates and the nurses and anything else that might remind him that he's alive right now.

It's not that he's upset about being alive. He's glad, honestly. It's a second chance, and he's grateful for it, but also—

It means everything that came before (fighting, arguing, watching people die, holding a life in his hands and crushing it, his last wheezing breaths aboard that space ship) was meaningless. It was *nothing*. It was a story, a fun plot for the viewers at home, isn't he so inspiring? Wasn't his death beautiful?

He's still here. He's still alive. He's Kaito Momota. He doesn't know what that means anymore.

Shuichi asked for him as soon as he woke up, as did Harumaki and Ouma, and apparently even *Yumeno* asked about him pretty early on. All his classmates were probably hoping for more of his endless optimism, his ceaseless support. Kaito Momota, Luminary of the Stars, adored by crying children and whatever other stupid shit he claimed.

His hands tug at the bottom of his hospital issued shirt. It's a pale blue, almost white, with polka dots of a slightly darker colour. The pants match. Both are *incredibly* ugly on him. The shirt keeps riding up over his stomach and the pants barely reach his ankles, making him look like an awkward teenager in the middle of a growth spurt. He's not allowed his jacket or pants or even his *shoes*. Hair gel is also out of the question.

The worst part, though?

He can't see the stars.

Hospitals have a lot of light. Even late, there's lights on, nurses bustling around and people being treated, and despite he and his classmates having

their own wing the lights never fully turn off. The night sky is hard to see, and the highest he can get is this third floor balcony near his room.

It's not enough. Kaito craves the dark, dotted blanket of a sky free from light pollution, every faint spot and constellation visible. It was hard enough when they were trapped in that school, but in some ways it feels worse here. Here, they're supposedly free. Even at this late hour the sky is a starless sheet.

When he hears footsteps he starts to stand, pushing himself up on shaky, unsteady legs, but what greets him is not a nurse.

"Momota-kun," Akamatsu says. She's only just opened the door, her blonde head poking out. "Mind if I join you?"

He shakes his head. "Yeah—I mean, no I don't mind! Always happy to see a friend," he says brightly, settling in one of the chairs set on the balcony rather than letting his legs dangle through the railing. Akamatsu takes the hint, pulling out the chair across from him. This balcony is a small one, a rectangle of concrete with no furniture other than the two chairs and the table between them, which is why Kaito likes it. It's too small to fit all his friends and therefore none of them visit.

No other reason they haven't seen him yet. It's not because he rejected them so sharply that first week he was awake, hiding behind the nurses and making excuses. It's not like he let coughing up blood stop him before.

Akamatsu is the first person he's seen in two weeks, besides the nurses who avoid his eyes. Even in the hospital scrubs she's bright and beautiful, a daisy growing from a crack in the pavement. Death hasn't made her spark any dimmer. In the pale light on the balcony she almost glows.

"I brought something," Akamatsu says when the silence stretches too long. She sets a collapsible telescope on the table, stretching it out. "There's a claw machine in the common room. I've gotten pretty good at it, and I managed to grab this today, and I thought you might like it?"



Kaito's hands shake when he touches the cheap telescope, brushing his hair aside and holding it to his eye.

His view of the sky is unchanged. This is a toy, shitty plastic and cheap glass, and it can't bring him the stars.

"Thanks, Akamatsu," he forces out, plastering a grin on his face and giving her a thumbs up. "Well, I gotta get to bed, so—"

"Shuichi's worried about you," Akamatsu blurts out, right as Kaito presses his hands to the table to stand. He's frozen in place by her words. "I told him not to worry at first. And then I got this little toy, and I thought, oh, I can prove him wrong!" She rolls the telescope across the table, making a rattling noise. "But he's right, isn't he?"

Kaito chuckles slowly as his brain scrambles for a response. "No! No, Akamatsu, tell Shuichi I'm alright, please? I'm really fine. Just, y'know—side effects," he says desperately.

Everyone who died, which is most of them, have had side effects after waking up. Kaito hasn't been witness to any of this, but the nurses told him, and the fading scars on Akamatsu's throat confirm it.

"Shuichi and I don't lie to each other," Akamatsu says, and Kaito desperately wishes the balcony would crumble below him.

"I'm not a liar," Kaito says firmly, even as Ouma's stupid smile pops up on the inside of his eyelids. Akamatsu isn't smiling. "Thanks for the telescope, really. It's, uh..." he searches for something nice to say. It exists, that's for sure.



"It's not enough, is it?" Akamatsu taps her fingers on the table. "There's not a piano here. The closest I found was a kid's toy." She looks down at her chipped nails. "I'm not one of your sidekicks, Momota-kun. You can tell me if my gift sucks."

"It's not bad," Kaito argues, and Akamatsu laughs.

"The kid's piano keeps switching to meowing. At least the telescope doesn't do that. Sit back down?" Kaito's seated again before he realizes she's even asked him. He can't tear his eyes away from the scars on her throat.

Where are his scars?

("Have you ever smoked?" a nurse asked, during his first check up. Kaito had shook his head, and she'd sighed. "You've got a smoker's lungs.")

"When I was in school," he starts, voice coming out small and soft like the teenager he was. He clears his throat. "There was a telescope that a lot of the students used. Used to be a really big deal when it was first used, but then...better ones got made. So all the professionals moved on. By the time I saw it, it was pretty busted up, dents and scratches and everything. There was a scratch on the glass, but it wasn't too big so they never even bothered to replace it. And *that* telescope worked better than this one."

Akamatsu's eyes scrunch up when she laughs. "You never realize what you take for granted. I'd give anything to use a piano that doesn't meow." She rolls the plastic toy across the table, back over to him. Kaito watches her hands, chipped polish and cracks in her nails.

"Akamatsu," he asks quietly. "Do you ever think about..."

When he trails off, she picks up. "Yeah."

"You didn't even know what I was gonna ask."

She shrugs. "I can guess. Something about the game, I assume? You and I...we're in a strange position, aren't we?" Her eyes glitter at him. She and Shuichi have a similar kind of pull, a brightness that refuses to let the truth stay hidden.

"We all are," Kaito says, looking away.



"You didn't kill Ouma," Akamatsu says, easy, like the name doesn't feel like an arrow in the back, "and I didn't kill Amami."

"Akamatsu," Kaito says, almost pleading.

"I've been spending a lot of time with him, actually. Amami-kun. He... he made it a point, to say he doesn't blame me. He keeps asking to repaint my nails. Ouma-kun asks about you."

"I'm not talking to Ouma," Kaito says sharply.

Akamatsu sighs. "You don't need to."

"I—"

"But it might *help*, you know?" Her eyes pull him back, grab at the truth hiding in his chest. "He's not one of your sidekicks, after all. He doesn't expect anything from you."

Kaito's breathing sharpens, every inhale a knife in his lungs. His exhales taste like blood. "Is this why you came to see me? I *know* it's disappointing, okay? I'm not—I can't be their hero anymore." His gaze drops to the table, shame curling heavy in his chest, weighing his lungs down until he might drown.

"Momota-kun," Akamatsu says with alarm as she reaches towards him. Kaito stands up suddenly, going lightheaded for a second as his blood rushes.

"You were the real hero. You would've done so much better than me," he blurts out. The shitty cheap telescope clatters loudly as it rolls off the table. "I fucked it all up."



"Be my sidekick, then," Akamatsu says, and the shock of it knocks the words right out of his mouth, knocks him back into his chair. "You don't have to be the hero for your friends to like you."

His mouth is dry. His hands are sweaty. Akamatsu's pink gaze is gentle and heavy.

"Be *your* sidekick," he repeats, and she closes her eyes when she nods. He exhales slowly, freezing again when her eyes reopen.



"You're pretty strong, right? You can carry my piano around so I never have to play on anything less than the best. Or you could be Shuichi's sidekick and help him find clues and hold a little magnifying glass for him." She smiles at him, syrup sweet. "You'd never have to be the hero again."

"That's not what being a sidekick is," Kaito argues, leaning forward.

"It's—" His mouth snaps shut, and he leans back against the cold metal chair. "It's about support. The hero supports their sidekicks just like they support the hero, but the hero—the hero can't be weak. The hero has to set an example."

"And what kind of example are you setting?" Akamatsu asks softly, leaning towards him so her torso nearly touches the table. He wants to flinch, lean away from her eyes and her grasp before she rips the beating heart out of him, tears his chest open to reveal his ribs and the lies rotting in his lungs. She's as bad as Shuichi when it comes to truth, worse even. It took him time to truly embrace. She was willing to die for it.

"That telescope," Kaito blurts out. "It used to be state of the art. Brand new. People came from all over just to try it out. And now it's...obsolete. It's only used by students anymore."



Akamatsu nods. "But it's still being used, isn't it? Maybe it's not as famous as it used to be, but I bet the students like it. Right?"

"People leave flowers," he mumbles, looking down at his hands. The knuckles are white where he's gripping the table. "It was its...birthday, I guess. Twenty fifth. There were flowers and cards and drawings. Like a grave."

"Like a birthday."

"I failed, Akamatsu," Kaito says, and then he slumps forward against the table. "I set the worst fuckin' example and then I fucked off and died. I'm not a hero, never was, just a fake and a liar, and I can't—I can't let Shuichi down again, or Harumaki, or anyone else."

He's not going to cry in front of Akamatsu, he refuses, and then her hand brushes his head and the fragile thread tethering him to earth snaps. "You're their hero," Akamatsu says quietly, her hand moving to rest over his as he lifts his head pathetically, "because you believe in them. And..." Her smile slants, more genuine than Kaito's seen it. "I'll believe in you. I'll make you my sidekick, until you're ready to be the hero again. And I *know* you'll be ready again."

Kaito snuffles, a frankly embarrassing sound for someone like him, managing a choked "*Akamatsu*" that she responds to with, "Kaede."

"Kaede," he repeats.

"Kaito." Kaede smiles at him like the sun. She leans down, picking the shitty telescope up off the ground and passing it back to him. This time, he takes it gratefully, holds it close to his chest and tries to breathe deep.

They both stand at the same time. Kaede reaches towards him, arms outstretched, and Kaito grabs her and pulls her in. His head rests on top of hers. The hug only lasts a moment, but it's more physical contact than Kaito has had since this whole stupid thing began, and it feels like being brought back to life.

"I'll see you at breakfast tomorrow?" Kaede asks.

"You can count on me."



In the morning there's a bouquet of pink flowers on his bedside table. The attached note says, in frilly pink gel pen, For my sidekick.

Kaito inhales deep, exhales without wheezing, and thinks, Maybe I'll be okay.







On Your Marks

Written by Alerane | Art by Beka

The sun was high in the sky, the conditions were perfect, not a cloud out there. No one, not even Mother Nature, was going to rain on his parade today! With a bounce in his step, Kaito crossed the grounds. His eyes skimmed over the track where the staff and volunteers were already starting to set up the coming events. Sure, there was still attendance and homeroom, but after that, he was going to have his first big victory here at Hope's Peak Academy! He pushed open the entrance doors into the busy halls of before-class bustle.

As Kaito made his way in, a hand slapped his shoulder. "Good to see you came prepared with better footwear!" a voice boomed. The towering figure behind him was an upperclassman, one who seemed just as hyped as Kaito was for the event: the Ultimate Team Manager.

"Sure did." Kaito grinned, hefting the sneakers he had slung over his shoulder by the laces. They had a personal touch too: gold stars and tiny embroidered shooting stars. Perfect for him! "I'm serious today, you'd better watch out!"

"Excellent! We could use a challenge from the first years!" Nekomaru laughed, hands falling back to his hips. He was wearing his own odd footwear, geta sandals, but the bag on his shoulder made it clear he was ready to change.

"A challenge? You gonna take us on? Bring it!" Akane chimed in from behind him, a wicked grin on her face as she packed a fist. *What kind of challenge was she expecting?!*

"Yeah, I'll see you at the tug of war!" Kaito prompted, trying to steer things back to the event and away from... Whatever idea Akane had. He glanced across the hallway and pointed at the redhead leaning over a girl's locker. "Your class too, Leon! You bring your all!"

"What?" The baseball star looked up with irritation, then shook his head. "Oh right, Sports Day? Tch, like we musicians care about something so dumb. Right Sayaka?"

Popping her head out of the locker, Sayaka giggled and smiled behind her hand. It always looked like that girl had a secret. "Oh, I don't know, I think it'll be fun! Got to stay in top form to perform." The look of betrayal on Leon's face was priceless. The idol turned her dazzling smile to Kaito. "Good luck today!"

"Thanks!" Taking this chance to escape before Akane set her sights back on him, he waved and left. He heard her challenging Leon as he made his way out of sight, Sayaka's melodious laugh ringing out again.

The astronaut trainee rounded the corner into the hallway with his own year, his anticipation mounting. Their first time competing together as a team! Most of the studying done at Hope's Peak had everyone split off for talents, but this? This would be a group effort.

Kaito opened the door to the hubbub of chatter, everyone spread out and ready to go! The energy in the air was excellent! He could feel the excitement, they really were going to show those upperclassmen that they wouldn't be taken lightly! He pumped a fist in the air. "Alright!"

He was nudged out of the doorframe, his shorter classmate, Ryoma, muttering an 'excuse me' to pass. Looking back into the room, the bubble burst, his imagination having painted the room with far brighter impressions than actually resided within. There was chatter; Kaede in particular was talking with Miu and Angie, while Gonta was in discussion with Kirumi who was marking down attendance in the absence of their teacher. However, the only two who looked ready were Tenko, who was jogging on the spot, hair looped up into a bun as her eyes roved the room, and Rantaro, who had arrived in his gym clothes. Most others were seated at their desks like it was an ordinary day.

Kaito's grin squished inwards at the underwhelming feeling, but he soldiered on, crossing the room to his sidekicks. They were both at Maki's desk, the detective waving from his spot standing beside it while Maki glared from her seat. Kaito's smile returned at the acknowledgement. He thumbed back at the rest of the class over his shoulder as he arrived, "Can you two believe this?"

Shuichi checked behind him, as if he was expecting something amiss, but looked back at a loss. "Believe what, Kaito?"

Maki didn't even spare the room a thought, still waiting on the astronaut to spit out the rest. He was a little shocked neither of them seemed to notice.

"Believe the lack of spirit! Doesn't look like everybody's ready to win yet!" Kaito explained, patting Shuichi on the shoulder as he caught him up.

"We're not going to win," Maki retorted, sighing as she shook her head.

"What? Maki Roll, that's quitter talk! Don't you believe in us? I'm sure we can pull it off!" Kaito shot back as he raised a fist in the air, his shoes swinging from his shoulder loose as he did. The caregiver sat back to avoid them, crossing her arms, apparently unmoved by his declaration.

"Ah, it's not that we don't believe, Kaito, but, well... Our chances aren't all that high," Shuichi sheepishly chimed in. "Our class only has two athletes, and one of them is Ryoma. You know as well as we do his feelings on his talent. I doubt he's going to be all that competitive today."

"Now hold on! Just cuz someone's talent ain't athletic doesn't mean they aren't a competitor," he countered. "Just look at Gonta, he could turn the tide in something like the tug of war, so long as we've got his back! Or front, since he'll probably be the anchor, but y'know what I mean. And how about Rantaro and I!"

At the mention of his name, Rantaro glanced up from the stretches he'd started. He was without context but waved at them on cue before returning to extend his arm across his chest and push it back.



Kaito beamed and mirrored the same stretch before looking back to his sidekicks. "Both of us are in perfect shape for our own talents, even if they aren't sports. Can't be caught on any mission or excursion without some endurance."

"So you think we'll win with three more competitors? That's not even half the class." Maki frowned. Kaito could be imagining it, but she didn't seem to have the same finality this time. Progress! He patted her head happily. She ducked a few seconds later, like a delayed reaction.

"Well, not just them, there's you two as well! Since we started training a couple months ago you're both our secret weapons! Don't tell me you weren't counting yourself, Maki Roll? You're fastest at pushups," Kaito insisted. He really hadn't expected that from her in the beginning, but given how tough her childhood in that orphanage had been, it wasn't a complete surprise. Shuichi's improvements were far more impressive, but he'd understand them assuming he wasn't a ringer for the class.

"I appreciate the vote of confidence, Kaito," Shuichi chuckled, cracking a smile. "I'm not really the best at these sorts of things."

"Do you really think we can win? The whole class has to participate." Maki remained unconvinced but diplomatic. "I'm not saying I'm not going to try, but we're not exactly a team."

"Those are just the easiest people to point out," Kaito sighed. "A team isn't all about peak physical condition, it's gotta have lots of parts. Everyone's got a job, even if that isn't lifting something or running fast. I bet there's loads of secret strengths we can use! C'mon!" He grabbed Maki's hand and swiftly yanked her up out of her seat.

Her eyes went wide as she found her balance, sputtering. Kaito didn't need to worry about that of course, he knew she was on the ball. Kaito pulled her up to the front of the class with him, looking for someone to add to their arsenal of secret weapons. Of those sitting at their desks he locked onto someone who looked to need some spirit, a hand propping up their cheek.

"Here's something no one else has!" Kaito announced, near scaring him out of his chair. He turned to look at the two of them nervously. "No other class has an Ultimate Robot! He's bound to give us an edge!"

"Are you referring to today's events?" Kiibo asked dubiously. "I'm unsure what help, if any, I'll be. As a physical activity for health, they don't account for someone like me. But I told Miu I want the true student experience, so I turned down her suggested improvements..."

No upgrades, huh? Kiibo's strength was pretty average, most of his functions were smaller utilities. But that wasn't enough to give up!

"That's not the edge I'm talking about," Kaito said, waving a hand. "I mean, sure those would help, but I bet a cool robot like you has more to prove than anyone else! Think of all the future robot highschoolers you can inspire if you win today! Something like that's gotta be motivating, right?"

"That sounds ridiculous," Maki said from behind him, freeing her hand and crossing her arms. "Just like the kids back at the orphanage talking about their Saturday morning shows."

"It's not ridiculous if it gets you going, though!" Kaito said, turning to lean back over the robot's desk. "Don't you want to be the hero of the class? The first robot to win at Sports Day?"

Kiibo seemed unsure.

"You should! Hold on, Maki Roll, you start training with him, I've got just the thing," Kaito pushed off the desk and pivoted away.

"You are aware," came a chilling voice as he passed another desk, "that we are to adhere to class rules until we're excused, yes?" Kaito spared a glance over at Korekiyo, who sat tall in his seat, bandaged fingers clasped on the desk. His soft laugh as always was muffled by the mask. "Someone's eager."

"Course I am, you should try it," he said, crouching in the closet. Kaito was positive this was where Tsumugi had stored her last project. Peering over his shoulder to be certain Korekiyo hadn't followed him for a cheap scare, Kaito's hand touched hair. He flinched back, eyes going to the closet again, where a face greeted him in the darkness. He caught himself when he recognized it as a familiar sleepy one.

"I'm just meditating, to gather mana..." Himiko mumbled from her spot tucked tight in the back. Tenko's endlessly searching eyes made more

sense now. In her own way, the mage probably needed this more than a warm-up; she might tire out if it was one guided by the other girl.

"Sure, do what you gotta," Kaito agreed, reaching behind her to grab his quarry. He yanked free the black and white pom poms from his classmate's cheerleader cosplay, bouncing them once experimentally before straightening up.

Maki was there facing him as he stepped out. Behind her it looked like Kiibo had taken up the stretching routine with Rantaro, to the latter's amusement. Shuichi was speaking animatedly with Korekiyo. The energy in the room was changing, bit by bit. Even Ryoma was back, talking with Gonta, demonstrating some step-technique. Maki raised a brow at his find.

"They're for encouragement!" Kaito said, waving the pom poms in the air.

"I think you're already doing that without a prop. If we do stand a chance at winning, it's going to be because you lead us there. I don't think Kiibo's a hero, or that Gonta will turn any tides. Shuichi and I might not be secret weapons, either, but I think you made a fair point about not quitting, there's still a chance." A faint smile appeared on her face.

Kaito's eyes lit up. He jumped up to throw his arms around Maki, who startled. "That's all I'm asking! We can't go down without a fight!" He squeezed tight, the pom poms ruffling behind her a moment before—

"Yoink!"

The pair looked behind them as Kokichi liberated the fluffy props, and waved them about, laughing. "Can't have a team without your supreme leader, right?"

"You give those back to Kaito," Maki demanded, indignantly freeing herself from the embrace. Kokichi took off and she ran after him.

"Hey, wait! Save it for the relay you two!" Kaito laughed. They were all fired up now, there was no stopping this! They'd leave their marks on this school.





The Law of Reflection

Written by Dev | Art by SillyMinny

At the start of junior high school, Momota Kaito had joined the baseball team. Not out of any real love for the sport, though. Mostly, it was because his young, teenage self had had a *lot* of pent-up aggression and a cheap, steel bat had felt good as hell in his hands. Cracking skulls was frowned upon. But baseballs? Less so, and he soon discovered he could listen to the sing of metal on woven leather for *hours* in order to scratch that never-ending itch.

This is not the history he remembers now, though. *Far too gauche*, Shirogane Tsumugi had decided, and so according to her, his story had gone more like this:

At the start of junior high school, Momota Kaito had joined the *tennis* team. He had done so because he loved to face challenges head on. To his adolescent lionheart, there was no greater thrill than reading between the lines of an opponent's movements as they lay themselves bare to him across the court, and he to them.

He had done so because one morning at age twelve, his grandparents had tuned into the local news channel, and the primetime special of a young tennis prodigy sweeping the nation had drawn Momota in like a fly to honey. So he'd thought, why not? What better challenge for him to surmount? Just think of all that he could learn from facing off against someone like *that*.

(Fans loved picking up on those little, interwoven hints of plot continuity, after all. Or so said Shirogane and her produc—)

Momota yanks his shoelaces tight, forcefully cutting that thought off as he stands up from the bench and makes his way onto the court.

Across the way, his partner ceases spinning the handle of his racket and heads in to match. Momota can't help but cock his head as he watches it happen.

"*Huh*," he says aloud.

Hoshi glances up from where he'd been testing the tension of his racket, one eyebrow raised in silent question.

"You used your left foot just now," Momota calls out. When Hoshi continues to level him with a blank stare, he elaborates. "You said you always started with your *right* foot 'cause of superstition and what-not. Y'know, back in the casino."

Across the way, Hoshi looks down to the ground, seems to consider his scuffed up sneakers for a lengthy pause. Then, he turns up to Momota with a shrug. "Guess I did," is all he says.

"...Guess so," Momota lamely agrees.

Momota can tell his attempt to skirt around his verbal slip has fallen flat. Hoshi doesn't seem to mind it, though. He trails his cool stare down the length of Momota's arm in the ensuing silence. Asks, "You want to serve first, then?"

Momota nearly fumbles the ball he'd been holding. "Uh. I mean, not if you wanted to, or—"

Hoshi spins his racket. "Doesn't much matter to me." Spins it again as if to punctuate the point.

Not for the first time, Momota thinks that holding a conversation with Hoshi has always been *difficult*. It had been that way during the Game for a myriad of reasons. Even on the other side, things haven't exactly changed.

"Right," he says, just to say anything. "Then..." He toes the baseline, gives the ball a lofty toss, and zeroes in on the whistle of his racket as it rushes in to meet it.

The afternoon sun casts the long shadow of Hoshi's racket out like a hunter's snare as it arcs across the court towards Momota on his return. It's all Momota can do to lunge sideways to try to catch the ball as it whizzes towards him on a bullet-like trajectory. He feels the reverberating impact sing through his hand. He watches the ball arc pathetically past the low-hanging sun, then back down once more to dribble out at the base of the net.

“Fifteen-Love,” Hoshi remarks from somewhere beyond Momota’s laser-focus on the sedentary ball.

Momota is at once reminded of how, when he’d first woken up and stumbled out of his room to the blaring sound of the hospital alarms, he’d caught sight of the moon beyond a corridor window. He remembers how it had seemed so incongruous and much too far away, when only moments earlier he’d been watching his blood-stained fingers nearly kiss its surface through the shuttle window as he’d plummeted towards Earth.

He remembers how, immediately after that revelation, he’d crumpled like paper and been sick all over the sterile, linoleum flooring of the hospital ward. Hoshi, in contrast, looks the absolute picture of health as he twirls his racket in the warm, sunset glow.

Something lashes hotly in Momota’s stomach. He recognizes it to the tune of words like *sidekick* and memories of virtual snow. Jealousy has never been a good shade on him, both before and after the Game.

Gnawing the inside of his lip, he wrenches his gaze away and moves to where the ball had rolled off to. Hoshi looks as unfazed as ever as he watches Momota snatch it up, doesn’t say a word as he calmly takes it from him across the net.

Momota tastes copper on his tongue as he trudges back to the service line.

The first set is over before the pins and needles sensation from that first volley has had the chance to leave Momota’s palm.

“Good effort,” Hoshi offers Momota as some kind of consolation.

The spot on Momota’s lip is sore, but he prods at it with his tongue anyway. “Yeah,” he says, grin split too wide as the word stings bitterly behind clenched teeth.

The second set goes by equally as fast. Hoshi doesn’t even make an attempt to move as Momota’s final swing makes contact with the ball with too much backspin. His catlike eyes track the motion lazily as the ball curves like a comet pulled out of orbit, out of bounds.

“Nice set,” he says in the same, unaffected monotone as before.



Momota's lip is fully raw at this point. He feels it curl like a lit fuse as the words suddenly explode out of him. "What the *hell* is your deal, man?"

The racket jerks to a halt in Hoshi's hands. It's hard to see under the lip of the beanie, but there's a minute enough shift in his stoic expression to suggest eyebrows lifting. "Scuse me?"

"I mean!" Momota throws his hands out. "Why are you *okay* with this?"

"This?"

"This match! This... *tennis*!" Momota aims his racket towards Hoshi accusingly. Hoshi barely flinches. "You just accepted my offer like nothing!"

"I thought you wanted to play?"

"Of course I did!" Momota barks. "I *always* did!"

Hoshi's head dips sideways. "Always?"

Momota fumbles again, as he always does when anything 53-related tries to wrench itself out of his still-aching lungs. He opens his mouth, then closes it. Chews his lip until it stings. "You know what I mean."

Hoshi regards him a moment longer. Then he takes a step back, leaning up against the net behind him until the wire goes taut. Arms crossed over his chest, he remarks, "You play like an amateur."

Momota squawks, but Hoshi manages to cut him off. "No offense meant." The net sways as he rocks back and forth on his heels. "sides, I wasn't much better, if you didn't notice."

Momota scoffs. "What are you *talking* about? You wiped the floor with m—!"

"Not like I've *never* played," Hoshi interrupts again. He looks pointedly at Momota. "But you should really check the height of that pedestal you've got me on."

Momota's first instinct is to push back, but at Hoshi's insistent look, he lowers his hackles. He tries to play the scene in reverse. This time, the

reality—like negative film—stands out in contrast against the memory itself.

He sees Hoshi's failed serves not as minor miscalculations, but as fumbles. He sees the unbalanced receiving stance not as some new, advanced tactic, but as a boy simply not knowing how or where to stand. He recognizes the racket spinning not as a well-worn ritual, but as a simple means of fidgeting in anticipation of an incoming volley.

And whether it's out of some defensive justification for how thoroughly beaten he'd been, or some marionette-thread still spooling from his heart back to the beautiful lie Shirogane had spun, Momota realizes he *wants* to fight against this revelation. Because sure, it stings something fierce to lose to Hoshi, as failure and the idea of *second best* have always stung his proud lionheart. But wouldn't it sting all the more to acknowledge this not as some grand culmination of his silkspun plotline, but as just a one-off game between two nobodies? If his opponent is not Hoshi Ryoma, the Ultimate Tennis Pro, but simply Hoshi Ryoma, a somewhat-average club member, then what?

If Hoshi Ryoma is just that, then what would that say about him?

"Do you remember," he eventually asks, letting the pent-up tension unspool from his body as he slumps against the net to Hoshi's side, "how many times I tried to get you to play even just *one* damn set with me back then?"

He doesn't have to elaborate to get Hoshi to snort. "Enough times that it didn't even surprise me when I finally caught you peekin' through the crack under my door."

"That was one time!" Momota barks back before he can stop himself. "So you *were* there, you dick!"

Hoshi breathes out a single, curt laugh in casual admission. Momota can't help himself from laughing along with it.

The sunset dips from warm oranges to a lavender coolness that licks across the tips of the last, wispy clouds. One of the court lights flickers on, then sputters out to a feeble glow.

Eventually, Momota admits, “I kind of idolized you, but I also kind of hated you.”

Hoshi hums and it doesn’t sound all that surprised.

“Sure it was all fake, but you were a goalpost I’d set myself against for *years*. And then suddenly there you were, in the flesh, caught up in the same BS as me, but...” He struggles for words.

Hoshi seems to hear them anyway. “But I wasn’t exactly as advertised on the box,” he surmises.

“It wasn’t even the tennis stuff that bothered me, really. If you’d gotten fed up or pissed off that would’ve been one thing.” He frowns down at the scuffed toes of his shoes. “It was so much worse that you didn’t even *care*.”

Hoshi mulls over that for a moment. “You don’t just mean about tennis, do you?”

Momota grimaces, lanced through by Hoshi’s pinpoint accuracy.

“I wanted to face you *just once*, to get a read on what you were really thinking,” he admits, “‘cause all I was getting was that self-sacrificial bullshit you were spewing, and I couldn’t just *accept* that, y’know? Not when you were so eager to give up and throw yourself on the chopping block like your life meant nothing to anyone, least of all you! Like that martyr-ing was what any of us wanted!”

He didn’t mean to get so fired up. The light flickers overhead. Hoshi is silent at his side, though the racket spins and spins in his grip.

Then it snaps to a stop. Hoshi aims the butt of it towards Momota with a pointed look. “Pot,” he eventually says. Then back towards himself. “Kettle.”

Momota sputters. “The hell does th—?”

“Don’t even try. I’ve had way more days to catch up on the footage than you.”

The response dies on Momota’s tongue. Its follow-up tastes sour as he grumbles back, lowly, “That’s not the same.”

“No, not exactly,” Hoshi concedes. “But that always was and still is a mighty high horse you’ve got yourself on.”

Momota tests a few more comebacks in his head, but they’re all too weak, too defensive, too petty. He rocks back on the tennis net, casting his gaze up at the sky. Indigo is setting in. He can just barely make out the winking of stars above the feeble, courtside lights. He just barely feels the nauseous stirring in his gut as the moon breaks past the treeline, her craters hardly visible this far away.

At his side, Hoshi is the picture of peace. It doesn’t twist Momota’s gut to see it like it did before.

He sucks in a deep breath, letting it out on a long, hefty sigh. Shirogane and Team Danganronpa were bastards. But maybe they were onto something in *one* regard.

The net jostles as Momota rights himself off it. Hoshi blinks up at him, not exactly as foreign and unreadable as he’d once seemed. Momota extends a hand out to him.

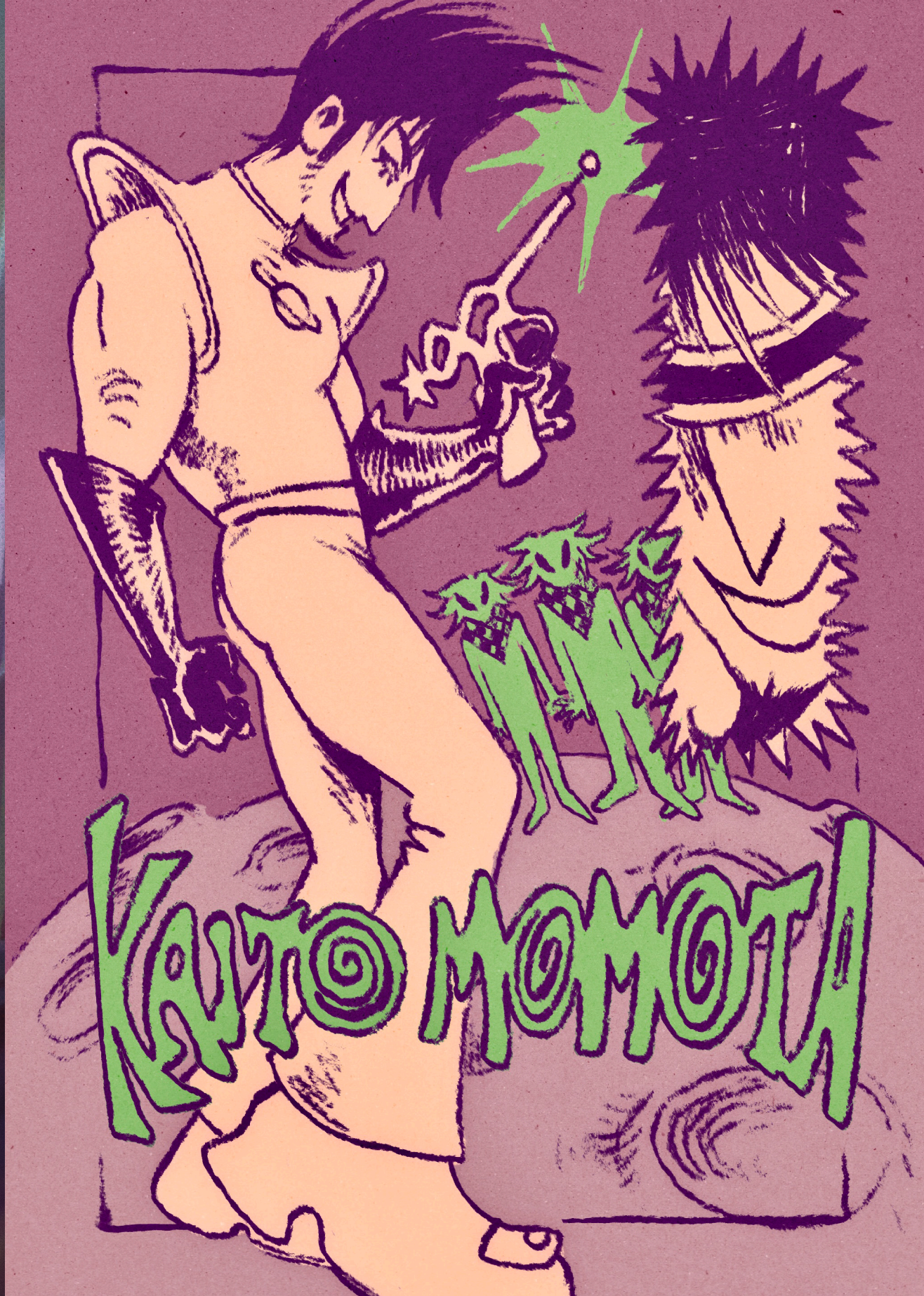
Bearing oneself on the court and all that. Understanding, in some fashion, and simultaneously being understood, even just a bit more than before. Learning something, even.

“Best of five sets?” he asks, his smile mirroring the lopsided curve of the crescent moon above them.

Hoshi snorts, ducking his head down as he accepts Momota’s offer, then heads back to his side of the court.

Momota catches his smile, regardless. Feeling his own brighten, he toes the baseline, gives the ball a lofty toss, and zeroes in on the whistle of his racket as it rushes in to meet it once more.





Blueprints for the Stars

Written by President-Homewrecker | Art by MARLOWEMEMO

Kaito Momota begins his search after school.

Logically speaking, the best time to track down a fellow student would be during school hours, but he can never bring himself to skip class. Even if they're covering topics he's already knowledgeable about, even if it would be more productive to work independently in his dorm, hanging out with his classmates isn't something he'd give up so easily.

He finds the person he's looking for not far from the dorms, half-hidden under an old junker. Or at least, that's who Kaito *hopes* he's approaching. As if there's anyone else on campus who would want to spend their free time underneath a car that hasn't been street legal since the nineties.

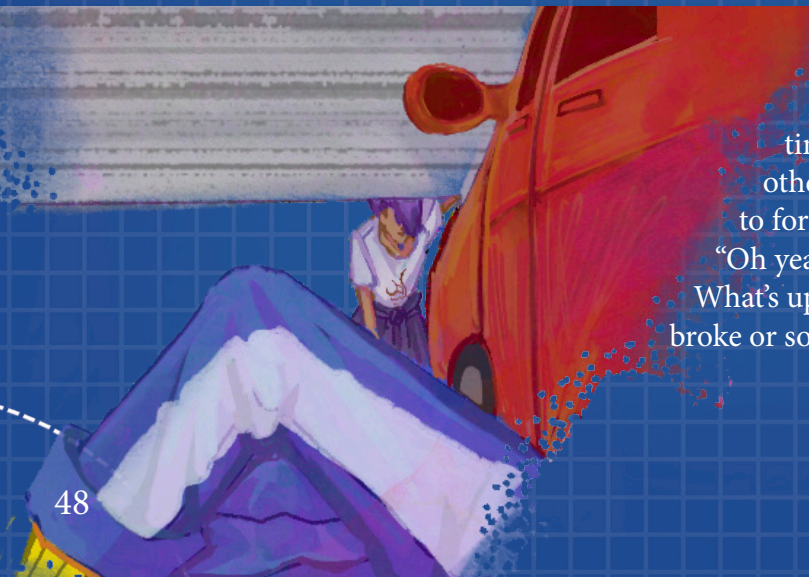
Kaito approaches the pair of legs sticking out from underneath the car. "Kazuichi Soda?"

"What's up?" Kazuichi doesn't even bother poking his head out.

For a split second, Kaito hesitates. Should he introduce himself or is that too formal? Or is neglecting to do so too presumptive on his part?

But it's just like he always tells Shuichi. Confidence is key.

"My name's Kaito Momota!" he begins. "First-year, Ultimate Astronaut."



Kazuichi pops out and distantly, Kaito notes this is their first time really seeing each other. It would be hard to forget hair that pink. "Oh yeah, I've heard of you. What's up? Your mini-fridge broke or something?"

Kaito shakes his head, pointedly ignoring that that was Kazuichi's first assumption. He'd get indignant about people only bothering Kazuichi when they wanted something... if he weren't doing the exact same thing.

"You haven't designed a rocket before, have you?"

Kazuichi heaves a sigh. "I wish. Hope's Peak denied my funding request. They wouldn't even get me one to take apart! How bogus is that?"

Kaito can't help wilting a little. "So you don't have any blueprints, then?"

"Are you kidding?" Kazuichi grins, leaning in like he's sharing a secret. "Of course I do."

He crooks a finger, motioning for Kaito to follow him.

Dumbly, Kaito stays rooted in place. "What about the car?"

Kazuichi snorts. "It's just repair work. I'd much rather be thinking about rockets anyway."

With one final glance at the old car—just to confirm that it isn't going to magically grow legs and walk itself into a garage—Kaito follows after Kazuichi.

Part of him knows that it was crazy to assume Kazuichi would just have the blueprints on hand, but he's seen crazier from Hope's Peak students before. No, what he's stuck on now is that he's being invited to hang out in a third-year's room.

◇ ◇ ✨ ◇ ◇

Maybe it's just because Kaito makes an effort to keep things orderly, but Kazuichi's room is a mess.

Half-constructed gadgets, half-dismantled appliances. Kaito's pretty sure that that's the greasy remains of an air conditioner in the corner. With a grimace, Kaito steps over an oil stain even Kirumi would struggle getting out of the carpet.

Still, it's not the messiest room he's ever seen. It's hard to compete with Miu, though Kazuichi might give her a run for her money when it comes to spare parts.

"Let me see..." Kazuichi trails off, drifting toward his desk. It's piled high with notebooks and folders, none of which look like they're for his actual classes. He methodically works his way through every drawer until he finally has the right pile of papers. "Aha!"

What he presents is less than professional, a bunch of sketches on lined notebook paper, torn so unceremoniously that there's a notable diagonal rip, but that does nothing to change the content. Those are *blueprints*.

And Kaito can't resist lighting *up*. It doesn't matter what it is—if it has something to do with the stars, then he's all in.

"This is the closest I have," Kazuichi says. He tosses them on his bed, inviting Kaito to sit in the same motion. "I can't really put together a rocket yet, but at least I know what makes them tick, you know?"

"Whoa," is all Kaito can respond with.

"Hell yeah *whoa!*" Kazuichi replies. He takes the topmost blueprint, the only one of the batch that depicts a full rocket and not just the engine, and launches into his explanation.

He speeds through the basics, outlining the structural system, propulsion system, payload system, and guidance systems of the rocket in the same voice Kaito uses when he explains his ultimate talent to little kids.

It's stuff that Kaito already knows, but he listens as politely as he can. After all, Kazuichi is doing this as a favor to him, and nothing shuts someone down faster than being told "I know" over and over again.

Still, he knows how to get to the heart of what he wants to hear. He listens carefully, taking note of what things Kazuichi feels are important enough to add emphasis on, and when the conversation lulls, he launches his plan into action.

"I bet you have some real insider knowledge on the engines, right?"

Bingo. Kazuichi's eyes light up like he's been offered the world on a platter. He spins back on the blueprints, fervently pushing through them until he finds one on the bottom.

He speaks in a hushed reverence as he presents Kaito with an engine blueprint. "Look at this thing."

Kaito looks it over and... yep, that sure is an engine.

"This is a full flow staged combustion cycle engine," Kazuichi says these words heavy with meaning, so Kaito nods along like he understands. "The rarest type of engine in rocket science due to how expensive it is to develop. Complex too. It has so many moving parts that any little change can set off a crazy amount of domino effects."

"And this is your design?"

"Yes—well, sort of? I mean, obviously I don't have the cash to work on one of these myself. The most Hope's Peak would even give was a tour of a space station. A *tour!* Can you believe that?"

"That's nuts, dude." Though suddenly, Kaito has a clearer idea of why Hope's Peak is so sparing with its allotments. They throw a lot of money at students, sure, but he has a feeling Kazuichi could bankrupt them in a matter of weeks given the chance.

But Kazuichi's already moved on, pulling out another set of blueprints. He's properly charged up now, and there's no stopping him. "And this is an electric pump feed engine. Lithium batteries power the motor, and it was considered impossible to get a rocket into orbit using this type of engine until only recently."



That sounds like a challenge if Kaito's ever heard one. Right away, he takes note of just how much space has to be dedicated to storing these lithium batteries. And with rockets valuing a lack of weight over efficiency, it's no surprise why it would be so hard to get a spacecraft into orbit using this. "Let me guess. You wanna make the first?"

"Yeah! Well, I mean, there are already a couple. The Electron and the Delphin engines have both managed it. But imagine getting a satellite into orbit because of these types of engines! There's gotta be a way, right?"

"There's always a way!" Kaito agrees.

"Yeah, yeah! You get it! There has to be some way to offset the weight of all those batteries, or to reuse the materials for a later stage. There's gotta be *something* we can do to harness the efficiency that a biprop engine gets."

Kaito nods, getting the distinct feeling he should've gone into this conversation with note-taking supplies at the ready.

Kazuichi stops short. The confusion must be written all over Kaito's face if it was enough to stop the technobabble, and his grin turns apologetic. "Wait, that probably doesn't make a lot of sense, does it?"

Kaito reacts without thinking. It's natural, almost instinctive, for him to step into the reassuring role. He could practically hear that last sentence in Shuichi's voice, so he flashes a big thumbs up and the cheesiest grin.

"Makes sense to me! But, hey, mind telling me what a biprop engine is?"

Bingo.

Kazuichi is overjoyed to explain the difference between regenerative cooling and ablative cooling, when a monoprop engine is better suited than a biprop and when it's better to move up to more complex closed cycle engines. Kaito loses the thread more than once, but Kazuichi is always more than happy to go back and explain.

It's clear that the logistics of his work aren't something he gets to talk about often, and frankly, that just encourages Kaito to find him so they can talk rocket engines more.

Kazuichi sits back, his expression oddly sober. "Hey, man... you mind if I ask something?"

Kaito furrows his brow. Why the sudden change of subject? Weren't they supposed to be talking about how rocket engines keep from melting during takeoff? "Uh, sure. Go for it."

"Is it really necessary that you know all this stuff?"

Kaito's asked himself the same question before, a hundred times over. Does he really need to take music lessons? Does he really have to learn so many languages?

The answer is always no. He could do the bare minimum if he wanted. But he doesn't. He wants to go above and beyond. To set people's expectations high and still manage to exceed them. Forever and always, shooting for the stars.

"Doesn't matter, I don't think. I'd want to know either way. It's hard to appreciate the stars if you can't explain what got you there."

Kazuichi beams. For a brief moment, it's jarring to see those sharp teeth on display, but it's only a beat before Kaito is smiling back just as widely.

"Yeah, I totally get that! Sometimes you just wanna know how stuff works. That's so cool, dude. And..." Kazuichi trails off. "It's kinda how I got into being a mechanic myself. I just always wanted to tear things apart, and as it turns out, that's the quickest way to learn how to put them back together."

"Totally!"

It's human nature to want to learn, to understand, and he's sure that if he ever met any other life out in space, they'd be just as curious to understand him as he was to understand them.

"Hey, mind running me through expander cycle engines again?" Kaito asks. "That and the engine type you really like."

"The Merlin!" Kazuichi's already up on his feet, grabbing a library book tucked under a stack of papers. Kaito wonders just how long he's had that.

“You should bring a notebook next time,” Kazuichi jokes, then he stops short. “I mean...”

But Kaito just flashes him a big thumbs up. “Of course there’s going to be a next time!”

It would be weird to ask an upperclassman to be his sidekick, though, and even if Kazuichi acts a little lonely, it’s not like Kaito has to take him under his wing or anything. Maybe he just needs a different word for it. Not a sidekick, but a man in the chair. The Q to his James Bond.

Something tells him Kazuichi would be more than happy to accept.







Withering

Written by Jimcloud | Art by Noodle

The stars tonight are just like how I remember them.

For a second, the thought takes me off guard. I've gotten so used to the starscape up above me all through this stupid killing game that I almost didn't recognize them, but no, no. There's Ursa Major... and the North Star. Deneb and Altair are bright in the sky as usual. The summer stars are all bright and shimmering in full glory. The thought makes my chest all warm and cozy.

It feels... good. *I* feel good. Better than I've felt in ages. Everything feels so *good*, I can't help but laugh, loud enough that I have to stop myself. It's late. I dunno that the sound would've woken anybody up, but I don't wanna chance it. Man. It's weird. It feels like there's this huge weight off my chest, but I can't even remember having one there. Thinking about it feels...

...Off. I decide not to bother, and just let it go, leaning back against the bench I'm sitting on. The stars are so *perfect* right now. I'm almost afraid to look away, like if I stop, they're gonna go back to those old, unrecognizable shapes. I guess I could've made new constellations out of them, but it felt like cheating on my wife, y'know? She's been good to me. I don't wanna do her dirty just because I haven't seen her in weeks, gettin' cozy with some *new* sky.

...Okay, Luminary, think you lost the thread here at some point. The sky is *right* there. There's nothing to worry about right now. So I don't bother worryin'. I breathe in, deep and full, taking in that crisp night air, and watch the sky for what feels like hours, as it goes down and down the horizon, but it never quite makes it to sunrise.

It's... a good feeling. I don't need the sun to rise. Sunrise means another motive in this damn killing game. The last one was bad enough, with those... Hhhhghgh. Don't think about it, Kaito, just don't. Don't even think the word gh, gh—

My chest flares in agony, and I suck in a sharp breath, clamping my hands over my mouth. Don't, don't, don't, *don't*—

...Huh. Don't... remember why I was doin' any of that. I pull my hands away slowly, and I can't help but look at them as I do. Heh. There's a flower there. Think I remember this one. Astrantia? It's a good indoor plant, and I was always meaning to put one in a pot back home. Mostly 'cuz it looks like stars, y'know? All bright and spiky. But 'sides that, it represents strength, and overcoming obstacles. It's the perfect flower for a guy like me.

It's the prettiest fuchsia color, too.

Not a very manly thought, so I stuff that one away and set the petals down next to me. I mean to look back up at the sky, but I can't help but stare over at the petals instead. The wind picks up, and I have to grimace at it, lifting a hand up to try and keep the worst of it from my face. As I do, though, I get stuck watching the petals of that astrantia fly away on the wind, one by one. When they're gone, my eyes pull away, to the bushes nearby.

There are... so many astrantia blooming. More than I even thought we had the room for. But the wind gets stronger, so bad I've gotta close my eyes. When I open them... they're all gone, nothin' but bare stems left behind. It kinda hurts to look at. Those flowers were in their prime, y'know? They had so much to live for, and now it's all... gone. Or will be, soon. All that's left is the withering stem of that fragile little bloom.

It's so... *weird*, too. The wind's never done anything like that. Not in the time I've been here. I wanna know what's going on, but it's not like I can just ask the wind to explain itself. I'd have better luck staring at the sky for answers.

...The *sky*, though. That beautiful night sky. She's calling my name right now, and to be honest, all I wanna do is answer. I turn my head back up and watch the sky move. It's... huh. Is that Orion's belt? The Seven Sisters, too. I thought it was too late in the season to see them, damn. Well,



I'm sure not saying no to a gift horse, hah. I love the sky in all her forms, winter just as much as summer! Wouldn't be very manly of me to have a preference like that, would it?

I lean my head back and watch the sky again for a while. It sorta feels like the hours blend together. The night sky creeps down and down and keeps going, the sun nowhere in sight. I... honestly, I really, really like it. I love my sidekicks, and everybody else, too, but right now, there's no pressure to be anybody. I don't even have to be the Luminary of the Stars. I can just be... Momota Kaito, the guy who loves the stars more than anything here on Earth.

I'm gonna be up there someday. I know I will. I'm gonna make something of myself. I'm *not* dyin', not in some awful place like *this*. I've got too much to live for to do somethin' stupid like die.

The wind picks up again, cold and heavy, every *ounce* of winter in it. Now, I ain't normally the kind of guy to get fazed by that, not really! But it's *cold*. It feels like the chill's cutting right through me, in a way it never does. It... keeps sticking in my lungs, like little spikes of ice, and it just gets worse, every time I breathe. The air tickles in my throat, and it *stings*, and I—

I take in a breath wrong, and it sticks, and my chest heaves, and I let out a loud, nasty cough, lifting my mouth to stifle it. Fear spikes through me, but I dunno why, really. It's just a little cough. I pull my hand back and open it, and...

...Huh. Another flower. It's a potentilla. Never did think about growing these guys inside, but they're cute, like little fuchsia stars in your hand.

They represent endurance and wellbeing, y'know? And strength through hard times, just like these. They like it outdoors, in summer especially. I'm afraid for the bloom for a second, 'cuz this winter air can't be good for it, but that's kind of a stupid thought, since it's not even on a plant. It's just in my hand.



Potentilla ★

I have just enough time to wonder where the potentilla flower came from before my chest seizes again, pain blooming all up my throat as I let out a whole series of nasty, wracking coughs. With every cough, another potentilla flies out of my mouth. My eyes open wide between coughs, watching them fall into my hands. With each one, I feel weaker and weaker, and my chest hurts *more* and *more*. Eventually, there are just too many of them, and they spill out of my hands onto the sheets.

The sheets. My eyes blink open, and I keep coughing, my chest and throat spiking pain all through me with every move I make. It's not long before I feel wetness in my hands, and not long after *that* it starts spilling out of my hands onto the sheets. By the time it finally settles, I can't do anything but grimace at all the little splatters of fuchsia. It's on my hands, my sheets, a little on my shirt, and I can feel it dripping down my chin, too.

Good morning, Kaito. Up and at 'em.

Cleanup takes about ten minutes or so of careful wiping and scrubbing—of me, of my hands, of my clothes. I don't even bother tryin' to clean the sheets, since morning announcement won't be all that long from now. I just pull the blanket layer up over them. It's the best fix I've got, short of askin' Monokuma to get me another new set. Think I'm gonna save that one for an especially rainy day... If one of those is even coming, I mean.

Ugh. My cheeks feel like they're on *fire*, too. Maybe that's why I had that shitty dream. It's... not that it was bad, not really. It's just... a reminder of stuff I can't have, not while I'm in here, trapped someplace with a fake sky and no wind. Trapped too far away from anyone who could fix me better than over-the-counter meds could. If... if anyone could fix me now.

C'mon, Kaito, that's stupid. Don't think like that. Just keep moving. You gotta keep moving.

I pull myself into the bathroom and get out what meds I've got. There's an anti-inflammatory, I've got fever medicine, I've got a cough suppressant. It's working less and less, but no harm in trying. I get out some water from the sink and get started on the routine. It makes me feel like my granddad. He always had these pill popper things full of daily medication. Heh. Guess this means I'm gettin' old early.

...Except I'm not. I'm dying. The thought puts a shiver down my spine, makes my skin crawl, but I know it. I can *feel* it. I'm not getting better. There's no *way* I'm getting better. It's only been a week or so, but I've gotten so much worse, and so fast. If we don't end this killing game, and soon, I'm just gonna be, heh, another statistic. Momota Kaito, a statistic. Wouldn't that be funny.

I look up into the mirror, and I stare back at the pale skin, red cheeks, and sweat-damp hair of a dying man I don't recognize. The guy in front of me isn't good enough to manage the challenges in front of him, not good enough to keep Shuichi and Harumaki on the path they need to be on. He's not good enough to survive in a killing game.

But... that's okay. I've got a fix for that. I give that dying man a second to stare at his features, another second to be weak, and a minute—just one—to cry into the sink. I count the seconds down myself, just to make sure that guy sticks to what he's supposed to.

Once he's done, the guy looking back at me in the mirror is a stranger in a whole different way. He pulls up a cocky grin and a thumbs up before hopping into the shower. When he hops out, fever thankfully gone, he dries his hair nice and thorough before spiking it up. With a new change of clothes, a new look, and a new attitude, the Luminary of the Stars gives himself a wink in the mirror. Heh. Good luck out there, handsome.

He can't fail. I—I can't fail. Even if I die, these guys have a future ahead of them. Even if my flower withers... I can't let it be for nothing.

I just can't.





Table Setting

Written by ToxicPineapple and Glownary | Art by Zipsunz

Sweat dripped down Kaito's back, trapping his body heat inside his armor. Tenko appeared to be in a similar state; her forehead glistened and her breastplate heaved with each breath.

"C'mon, one more round," he insisted. "We can't stop without a tiebreaker."

Tenko wiped her brow with the back of her gloved hand. "You're on."

The two knights circled each other, searching for an opening. Kaito lunged to make the first move; Tenko quickly parried. The clang of metal against metal reverberated through the air as their blunt practice swords clashed.

They'd both come a long way since their time as trainees. Tenko's proficiency with a weapon these days was an impressive improvement. Kaito himself had learned to slow down; to search for openings instead of blindly rushing forward. Despite this being just a regular training session, the thought of their past filled Kaito with pride.

"What're you smiling for? Is this some kind of disarming tactic?" Tenko asked. She tensed, lowering her stance. "Because it isn't going to work!"

Disarming tactic, huh? It wasn't, but Kaito took the opportunity to push the offensive. "Nah, nothing like that." He feinted to the right, then struck to the left, throwing Tenko off balance. The other knight lost her grip on her sword and grimaced as she watched it fall out of reach.

Kaito moved to point his sword at her throat, ready to declare victory, but his eyes widened as she stepped in close and grabbed ahold of his wrist. With her feet planted steady, Tenko twisted Kaito's body and flipped him. An undignified yelp left him as his back hit the ground. He looked up to find the tip of his own sword hovering inches from his neck; she must have taken it during the maneuver while he was more focused on trying to land softly.

No matter how much Tenko's sword skills improved, she'd always preferred hand to hand combat. What used to hinder her in weapons training had become her greatest advantage—all it took was the foresight to know the right time to switch tactics.

A familiar voice and the sound of clapping interrupted Kaito's thoughts. "Ooo, nice one! Next time can you try sweeping his legs out from under him instead? I wanna see him fly a little further."

At the sight of Prince Kokichi, Tenko returned to a neutral position. "Your Highness."

Kaito scrambled to his feet with a groan. "Hey, don't call it over prematurely! I was just about to roll out of the way and grab her sword."

"Sure you were!" Kokichi said. His bodyguard, Maki, was trailing close behind him; she rolled her eyes but remained silent. "But you guys are done now, riiight? Since I ruined the opportunity and all."

Kaito and Tenko both squinted at him in suspicion; "Yes" left Tenko's mouth at the same time as Kaito said "I guess."

"Great! Then you're free to join me for a tea party, riiight?" The prince skipped over to Kaito and Tenko, grabbing each of them by the elbow with a pleading look. Tenko's back stiffened at the contact, despite the metal of her armor preventing her from actually feeling it.

Before either knight could respond, Maki stepped forward with a scowl. "No, they're not. You told me you wanted to watch them spar. You didn't say anything about dragging them away from their work."



Kaito scratched at the back of his head with his free hand. “Actually, we’ve been training all morning. It’s about time we took a break.” ...*And from the tension in the air, seems like Maki could use a break, too.* “Tea sounds pretty good right now. That okay with you, Harumaki?”

Maki stared at him for a moment, then shifted her attention towards Tenko.

“If Maki is going, I guess it’s alright,” Tenko said.

“...Fine.” Maki crossed her arms and stepped away from the door, allowing the others to move first. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Yay! You’re the best, Maki. That’s why you’re my favorite.” Kokichi’s words oozed insincerity. She responded with only a glare, and he froze briefly under the weight of it. “Yeesh, nevermind. Tenko’s my favorite.”

“Tenko doesn’t—um.” Tenko faked a cough and quickly started over. “Thank you, your Highness. Tenko is honored.”

Kaito tried his best not to laugh as the four of them made their way down the castle halls. He knew that Prince Kokichi could be aggravating at times, but demanding a tea party was pretty benign, as far as his antics usually went. Kaito and Tenko had both been ready to take a breather anyway. As the prince’s bodyguard, Maki was required to stay by his side at all times during her shift; if Kokichi just wanted to sit down and drink tea, at least he wouldn’t be causing her any trouble.

That comforting thought left Kaito’s mind the moment they reached the kitchen.

“Tea for four, Kirumi!” Kokichi called, bouncing on his toes. So much for not bothering anyone—Kirumi appeared to be in the middle of cleaning up.

“Ah, your Highness.” The maid paused in her work to bow. “My apologies. I’m quite busy at the moment.”

She looked it. Kaito frowned, watching Kokichi grab onto her arm and wobble his lower lip. Before Kokichi could start crying, Kaito spoke up, voice slightly raised.

“The last thing we want is to bother you, Kirumi.” Thankfully, Kokichi didn’t launch into a fit, hanging off Kirumi’s arm silently instead, so Kaito continued, “But you really look like you could use a break... when’s the last time you sat down?”

Tenko nodded and stepped forward. “Kaito is right!” Her hands fluttered over Kokichi’s shoulder blades before she hastily shoved them behind her back, as though she’d been contemplating moving him out of the way. “Kirumi is always working so hard, she deserves a rest and some tea!”

“Ah...” Kirumi shifted her weight. Kaito had figured that she wouldn’t bite; Kirumi took pride in her work. So maybe instead...

“And y’know, nobody makes better tea than you do.”

Kirumi smiled, glancing away. *Bingo.* She gently disentangled her arm from the prince’s slackened grip and turned to the counter, twisting a dish rag in her hands. Finally, she nodded, putting the rag down and facing the group once more.

“I suppose I can spare a moment,” she said, head bowed. “I would hate to deny a direct order from his Highness.”

Kokichi gasped, his eyes going starry. “Really? Oh, I *knew* you were my mother all along! But then, why the charade?” He barely paused for a second before gasping again. “Was it so that I could live a life you would never be able to provide for me? As a prince? Oh, Kiru—”

“If you would please leave my kitchen while I gather the necessary supplies for our party,” Kirumi interrupted, voice flat, “I would most appreciate it.”



“Got it.” Maki immediately grabbed the back of Kokichi’s shirt and dragged him towards the door. He only giggled as he followed, and Kaito and Tenko fell in behind, though they both turned to look apologetically in Kirumi’s direction as they went.

The four of them sat around a small table in the garden, positioned just by the outer entrance to the kitchen. Or rather, Kaito, Tenko, and Kokichi sat; Maki stood over Kokichi’s shoulder, arms crossed, a wrinkle in her nose and her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Kaito prompted her gently, “Oi, Maki.” He nodded at the seat next to Tenko. “You gonna sit or what?”

That intense gaze moved to Kaito, who only smiled back. Eventually, Maki sat.

Kirumi joined them soon after, carrying a loaded tray with a steaming teapot, saucers and cups, and an array of biscuits. Kaito leapt to his feet when she got close, carefully taking the tray from her hands, and Kirumi offered him a quick smile.

As she dished out cups and saucers, Kirumi said, “Please let me know if the selection of biscuits I gathered is in any way inadequate. I will see to it that you are accommodated immediately.” The request seemed primarily directed towards Kokichi, but Kaito saw her eyes flit towards the others as she spoke.

“Mmmm, I wouldn’t worry about it at all!” Tenko gushed as Kirumi poured her a cup of tea. She inhaled deeply, eyes closing. “Earl grey is such a tasteful choice! You always impress, Kirumi!”

Maki, fiddling with a loose strand of her hair, lifted her own cup and blew at the steam. “Thanks.”

“It’s whatever,” Kokichi scoffed. He looked bored when Kaito glanced in his direction. “I prefer white tea, but I suppose I can lower myself down to the level of you commoners, just this once.”

Appraising, Kaito turned to Kirumi, but the maid was unoffended. An outright expression of displeasure like that would surely have bothered her ordinarily, which meant...

“Didn’t know you had such a weak palate, your Highness,” Kaito remarked. He put down the tray when everything was served and resumed his seat, grinning. Kokichi, in turn, stared hard at Kaito, then huffed and looked away.

They lapsed into silence. Kokichi went for a biscuit first, dipping it into his cup and tossing it back with far too much excitement for someone who disliked the flavor. Maki went between scanning the area for threats and taking small sips from her cup, uncharacteristically mild, and Tenko seemed more keen on enjoying the fresh air than she was on drinking tea, though she did sip occasionally out of politeness.

It was peaceful, but quiet. Kaito didn’t mind, especially after such an intense training session, but it was rare to have so many of his friends in one place. This time would be better spent filled with conversation, not comfortable silence.

Thus Kaito prompted, “Did I ever tell you guys the story of how I became a knight?” At once, all the eyes in the circle fell on him.

“You became a squire, and then got knighted after five or six years,” Maki said bluntly. It was true, but also dull; Kaito fervently shook his head.

“Nope! It was after I defeated a dragon!”

Tenko gasped and shot upright, tea forgotten. “A *dragon*!? No way! Tell Tenko more!”

“Well, it all started before I even reached this kingdom! Back when I was just a kid in my old village, miles and miles away from here.”

“Whaaat? Kaito’s an immigrant?” Kokichi’s eyes widened. “I never knew that!”

Yes you did, brat. Kaito resisted the urge to reach across the table and thunk his forehead.



"You learn somethin' new about the people around ya every day!" he said instead. "So anyways, these flyers spread around about this princess who'd gotten kidnapped and taken away to a tower off far away. All the men and women from my village were suiting up to save her. Not because they cared, 'course, but for the glory! Anyone who could save that girl would be set for life!"

Maki scoffed, clearly fighting a smile. "Surely news would have reached our kingdom if a foreign princess got taken. No matter how many miles away your village was."

"A remarkable amount of information gets lost in translation..." Kirumi trailed off, then seemed to realize herself, shaking her head. "Please continue, Kaito."

After a quick smile at Kirumi, Kaito continued on his tale, using his hands to act out what he couldn't describe with words. Tenko seemed to be the most engaged out of any of them, though Kirumi was a close second, following his story with bright eyes. Maki, conversely, only spoke when there was a discrepancy she could point out, and Kokichi stopped participating about halfway through.

Kaito didn't notice until he'd reached the part of the story where he fought the dragon. He paused when it occurred to him, glancing at the prince. *Geez, is my storytelling really that bad?* What he found on Kokichi's face was not dissatisfaction, however, but a smile. Nothing like his normal mischievous smile, just a small, simple curve of his lip.

Then, the two made eye contact, and Kokichi's normal grin returned.



"Hey hey, this has been fun, but I'm actually super bored now! Gotta book it!" Kokichi sprang to his feet and ran around the table. "Smell ya later, peons! Ooh! Hi Gonta! You're it!"

With that, Kokichi took off, tapping Gonta, the large knight who had been making his way over with the presumed intent of relieving Maki, on his upper arm as he went.

"Ah—your Highness!" Gonta exclaimed. He waved hurriedly at the rest of them before turning to run after the prince, gone as quickly as he came.

Maki, who'd been halfway out of her seat, froze as she watched the two of them disappear into the distance. After another moment, she slowly sank back into it.

"Decided to stay with us?" Kaito prompted, smiling. Maki glared at him, biteless.

"It's Gonta's problem now. The brat got tired of not being the center of attention, whatever." She shrugged. Kaito hummed, wondering if that was truly the case, but Maki continued before he could put too much thought into it. "Besides, I haven't finished my tea."

Tenko nodded eagerly, eyes sparkling. "And Kaito hasn't finished his story! You were about to slit the dragon's throat, weren't you?"

Clicking his tongue, Kaito nods. "Damn right!" Stopping at the climax, what an amateur move... he'd better put his all into this to make up for it! "So I was about to land the finishing blow, but then something weird happened... the princess arrived! And she was *not* happy..."







Well Wishes

Written by Mots | Art by Viana

Five minutes after the bell rings for homeroom, before he's even fully settled into his seat, Shuichi learns one of his closest friends is in the hospital.

It's a professional and solemn update from Kirumi, standing at the front of class with her hands primly crossed. Pneumatic complications caused by asthma. Not contagious, not dangerous. Kaito has been out of class for a couple days already, but he'll be back soon. Nothing to be worried over.

What Kaito *isn't* doing is accepting visitors, and that's what sets Shuichi worrying anyway. It must show, because he feels Kokichi's eyes leering at him from a full two desks away.

"Wow, looks like *someone's* got their detective face on," Kokichi says, in that cheerful, peppy way that indicates he's imminently going to become a problem. "Why, Saihara-chan looks downright *surprised*. Did your bestest friend Momota-chan not tell you?"

Shuichi starts, because Kokichi is right. He never even knew Kaito *had* asthma, let alone that it could get so serious. When Kaito hadn't shown up to class, Shuichi had texted asking if he was okay; minutes later, his phone had lit up with a cheery *Never better, sidekick! Don't slack on your training while I'm on vacation!*

Kokichi's grin narrows into a leering smirk. "Well, can't say I'm surprised. Momota-chan's *such* a liar, after all."

"Momota-kun isn't a liar," Shuichi snaps, frowning. "He's not that kind of person."

"Nishishi! You sound so sure of yourself." Kokichi's lower lip quivers. "Saihara-chan doesn't know his best friend at *all*... that's so, so sad. It makes me... it makes me wanna..."

As Kokichi bursts into wailing crocodile tears, Shuichi looks away. *The kind of person Kaito is...*

The thought sticks in his head. When he picks up a large, stock "get well soon" card and heads out to collect signatures, the thought remains, nagging like an unsolved problem.

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"In the fuckin' hospital?" Mondo snaps. "Who do I gotta kill?!"

"Ah, nobody?" Shuichi sputters. "He's just sick, Owada-kun."

Mondo relaxes. "Well, shit. That sucks."

The Ultimate Biker Gang Leader had been easy to find: in the academy's sleek, modern gym, bench pressing weights the size of Shuichi's torso. He's seated on the bench now, a towel wrapped around his neck.

"It does suck," Shuichi agrees. He holds up the card and a pen. "Would you like to sign his card?"

"Oh, yeah, sure." Mondo perks up, taking them both. "That's a damn good idea. If he can't see his bros, least he can see his bros are thinking about him."

Shuichi nods. "Would you really have killed someone over this?" he can't help but ask, while Mondo is signing.

"Well, maybe not *killed*. But if someone roughed Momota up, I'd have to rough 'em right back." Mondo rubs the back of his neck and hands the card back. "He's like a little brother to me, y'know? Can't have people goin' around picking on him."

Picking on him? Little brother? "Momota-kun is pretty strong, though," Shuichi remarks.

"Yeah, he's strong, but he's all... sensitive and shit." Mondo shrugs. "He tries to hide it, but he's the kinda guy who feels with his whole chest."



Huh. Shuichi's not sure he's ever thought about it that way before. Momota's always seemed so *tough*...

"Keep that between us two men, alright?" Mondo huffs. "Anyway, go on. Get that card filled up, ya hear? Momota fuckin' deserves it!"

"Sure thing."

Kaito *does* deserve it. And with all the people who care about him, it should be easy enough.



Shuichi's next signature is unplanned. Sayaka catches him by the shoulder as he passes her in the hallway, her smile warm but worried.

"You're collecting signatures for Momota-kun, right?"

"Ah, yes?" Shuichi frowns. "Did someone tell you that?"

Sayaka smiles mysteriously. "Maybe. I'd like to add my own signature, too, if you have a minute."

Shuichi blinks, but nods, fishing out the card from its folder.

"Of course... but I didn't realize you and Momota-kun knew each other," Shuichi admits.

"That's understandable. We met a long, long time ago... you could say we were childhood friends." Sayaka's words are fond, expression distant as she loops her signature across the card. "Hehe. Well, he called me his 'sidekick,' but I think that's close enough."



Childhood friends... Momota-kun goes that far back with someone as famous as Maizono-san...?

"The truth is," Sayaka admits, expression clouding, "Momota-kun is very important to me. The early days of being an idol... they were hard, you know? Some days I would come home and just want to cry. But Momota-kun was always there with a smile, encouraging me to chase my dream no matter what."

Shuichi's expression softens. "He's really good at that, isn't he?" he agrees. "He's always encouraged me in the same way."

"That's right... you're his sidekick too, aren't you? He brags about you and Harukawa-san a lot," Sayaka giggles. Shuichi flushes. Sayaka caps her pen with a sharp *click*, and hands the card and pen back. "From sidekick to sidekick, good luck. And tell Momota-kun I said hi."

"Of course," Shuichi says, with a slight smile, although he's not quite sure *when* he's going to get to talk to Kaito again. "Take care, Maizono-san."

As Shuichi walks away, he remembers a conversation he had with Kaito a long time ago, early on in their friendship... though, really, it was more like Kaito telling wild, tall tales, one after the other, with Shuichi unable to get a word in edgewise.

"That star rookie in the major leagues? He used to be my sidekick! And that engineer who won the Nobel Prize, and the current prime minister... and I taught that pop sensation how to sing and dance!"

Shuichi stops dead in the hallway, eyes widening. *That pop sensation...*

Wait a second... just how much of that was actually true?!



The signatures from Shuichi's class come last. Like with Mondo and Sayaka, everyone has something they want to say, some anecdote that's been drawn out of them by the strange atmosphere. Tenko grumbles about how Kaito is missing their sparring sessions *and* making all the girls worry; Angie adds a little doodle of Kaito giving a thumbs-up and

cheerfully asks when Kaito will model for her again; Miu whines that if Kaito doesn't get back soon, she'll have to talk aerospace engineering with "Sou-dumbass" instead; and Himiko thrusts a bundle of balloons into Shuichi's hand and insists they'll "restore Momota's mana," whatever that means.

Kokichi, for his part, bemoans how *boring* his cardio is without Kaito to chase him, and hits Shuichi with a probing, sharp grin before he walks away. Shuichi shifts uncomfortably. Even after a day of talking to Kaito's friends, he still doesn't have a rebuttal for Kokichi's insult. Kaito *lied*, but does that make him a *liar*? Shuichi isn't convinced. But then, what kind of person *is* he?

While Shuichi's lost in thought, Ryoma—the last in line—moves forward, staring up at Shuichi from under his hat. "Hey, Saihara. I can sign this anywhere, right?"

"Anywhere there's room, Hoshi-kun."

"Been a while since I've signed something," Ryoma says conversationally. "Not since my tennis days... funny. Pretty sure Momota would've flipped for my autograph back then, too."

"Ah, really?" Shuichi asks, blinking. "Was he a fan of yours?"

"One of my biggest," Ryoma confirms, sounding wistful. "Kid was in a rival tennis club. He always had stars in his eyes whenever he faced off against us." Ryoma huffs. "Course, he was pretty disappointed to see what kind of man I'd become."

Shuichi frowns. "Hoshi-kun..."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to make this a pity party." Ryoma shakes his head. "Hope your friend gets better soon, Saihara. See ya."

As Ryoma walks off, Shuichi gets lost in his thoughts. Kaito's always been cold and awkward around Ryoma, but he'd never known why. Kaito, larger-than-life, idolizing someone...

Well, that's a thought for another time. Shuichi has a delivery to make.

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Given that Kaito isn't allowing visitors, Shuichi heads to the hospital right after class with only a heads-up text to Kaito, expecting to make a quick drop-off and then head home. He does *not* expect to see Kaito in the reception area, a wide grin on his face and a harried-looking nurse to his side.

His appearance startles Shuichi—that he's here at all, but also that his hair is down, hung back in a loose ponytail rather than spiked to the stars. He's in a hospital gown and a pair of sweatpants. His signature jacket remains, though; Shuichi suspects he wouldn't have gone even to the hospital without it. And maybe it's a trick of the lurid hospital lighting, but Shuichi swears he looks... paler than usual.

"Sideki—" Kaito's excited greeting stops; his Adam's apple bobs violently for a second on a suppressed cough before he continues. "Sidekick! Good to see ya!"

"Good to see you too, Momota-kun," Shuichi says, confused, but he smiles anyway. "I thought you weren't..."

"Accepting visitors?" the nurse finishes dryly.

"Plans change!" Kaito insists. "You gotta roll with the punches, or the punches'll roll you. C'mon!"

Kaito claps Shuichi's shoulder (less painfully-strongly than usual) and leads him onward. The silence fills when Kaito asks how everyone is doing, and Shuichi begins listing off the status of their classmates, one at a time. When they're back at the hospital room, Kaito settled into bed, Shuichi sets the balloons on the bedside table and hands the card over.

"Everyone pitched in to sign this for you," Shuichi explains.

Against all reason, Kaito looks *surprised*, taking the card in one hand with wide eyes. His expression softens as he begins reading through the signatures. He laughs at Maki's gruff message (*Training's weird without you*), eyes crinkled fondly; his eyebrows raise at Sayaka and Mondo's, eyes glittering with nostalgia; and when he gets to Ryoma's, his smile fades, and he swallows hard.

“Man, everyone really went all-out,” Kaito whispers.

Shuichi half-smiles. “Of course, Momota-kun. Everybody misses you.”

“Even Iruma?” Kaito snorts.

“Even Iruma-san,” Shuichi confirms. “You bring a little something to *everyone’s* life, you know?”

And maybe that’s *the kind of person Kaito is*, really: something different to everyone. A worthy conversational partner to Miu, an amusing liar to Kokichi, a part-time model to Angie. To Mondo and Ryoma, Kaito is a starry-eyed kid to be looked after; for Sayaka and Maki, he’s a friend and steadying presence, a light in dark and difficult days.



Aren’t those *all* the kind of person Kaito is? Maybe Shuichi was asking the wrong question all along.

Kaito gives Shuichi a long look.

“Sorry I lied to you,” he manages belatedly. His eyes drop to where his hands are bunching the stiff sheets of his bed. “About being admitted to the hospital and all. Men don’t get anywhere hidin’ like that.”

Shuichi shakes his head. “It’s alright. I still don’t understand *why*, though...”

“The whole thing’s just stupid,” Kaito grunts, waving a hand. “I pushed myself harder than I should’ve, and my asthma kicked my ass for it. That was my bad. Didn’t want anyone seeing me looking worse than I actually was.”

“So you... didn’t want anyone to worry about you,” Shuichi guesses.

“Something like that,” Kaito says, but from his flat tone, Shuichi’s not sure he’s hit the truth. Even after all this, maybe there are still... pieces Shuichi is missing. Things he doesn’t understand about Kaito.

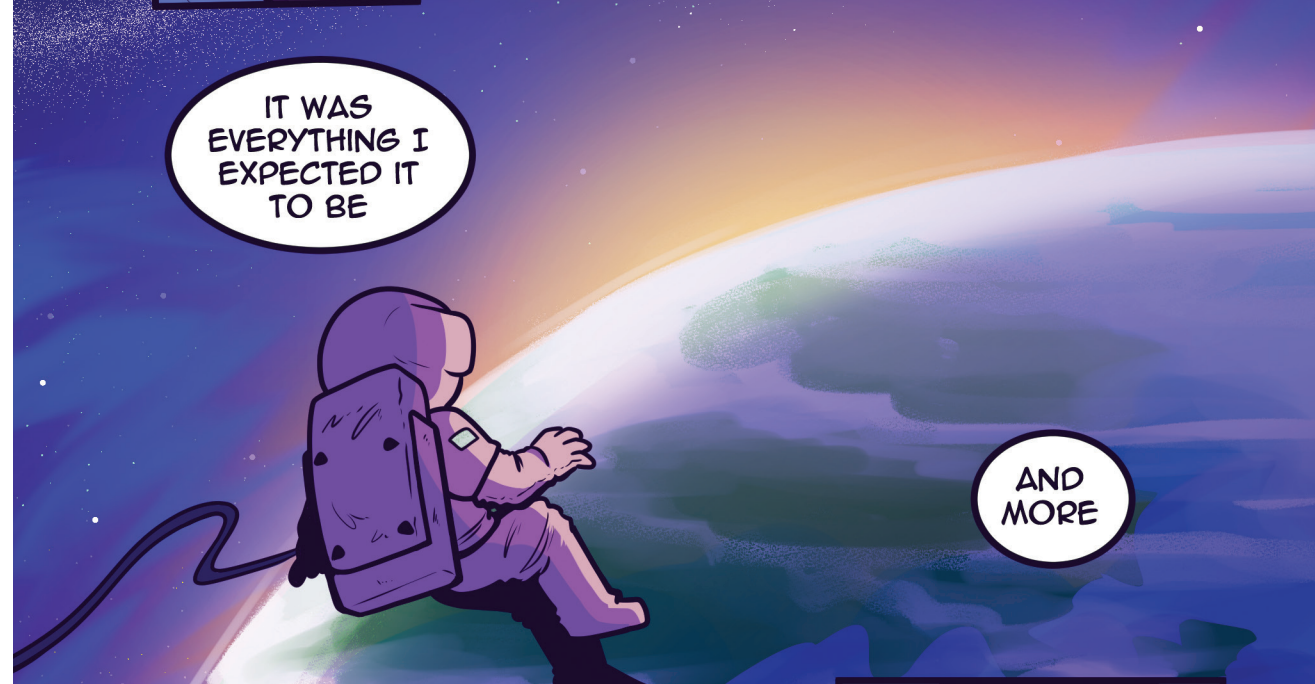
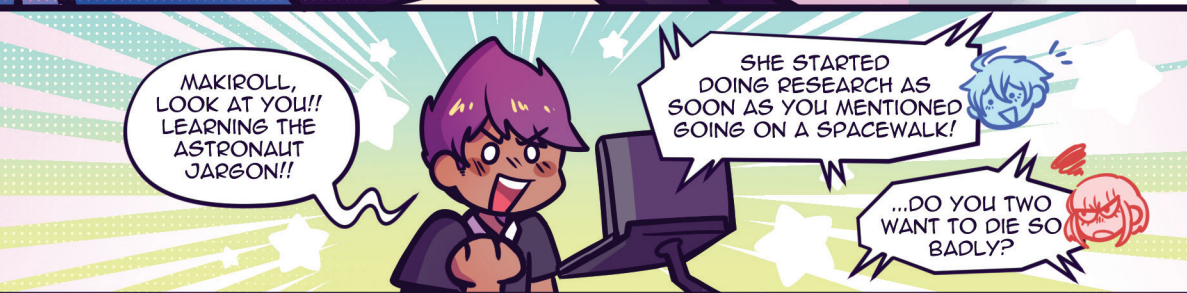
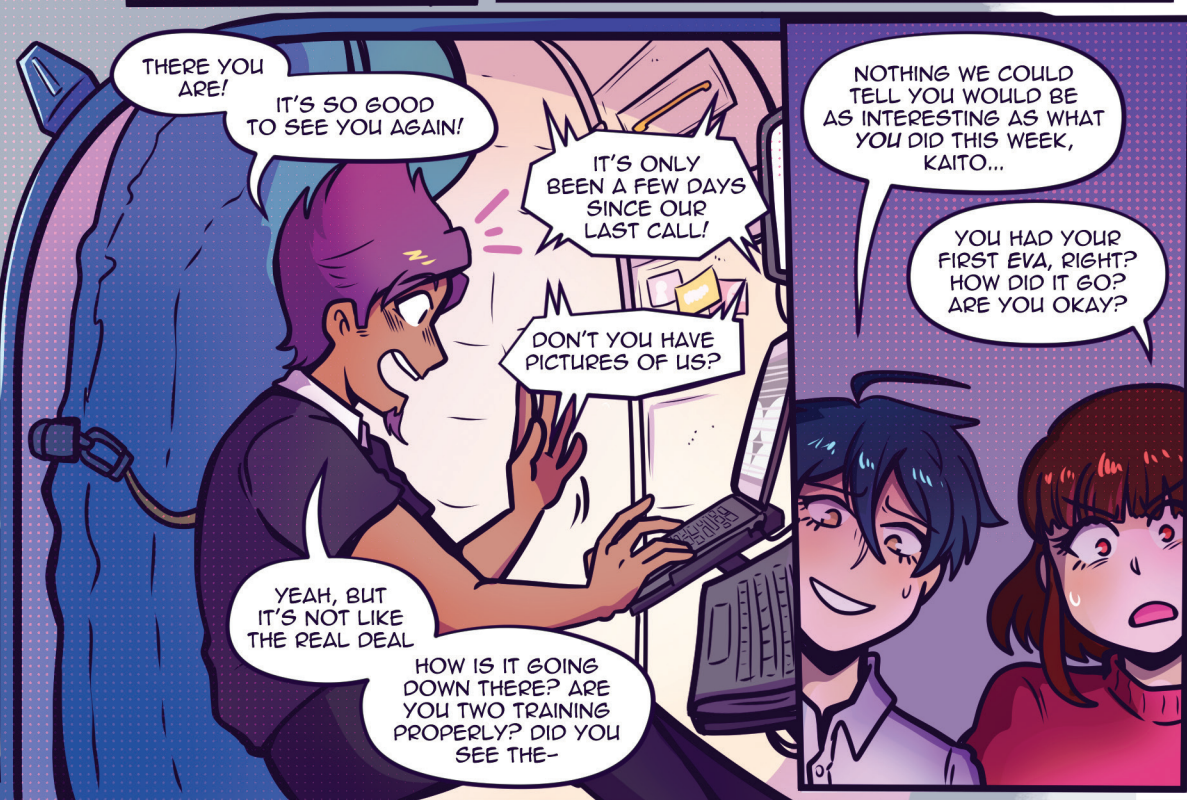
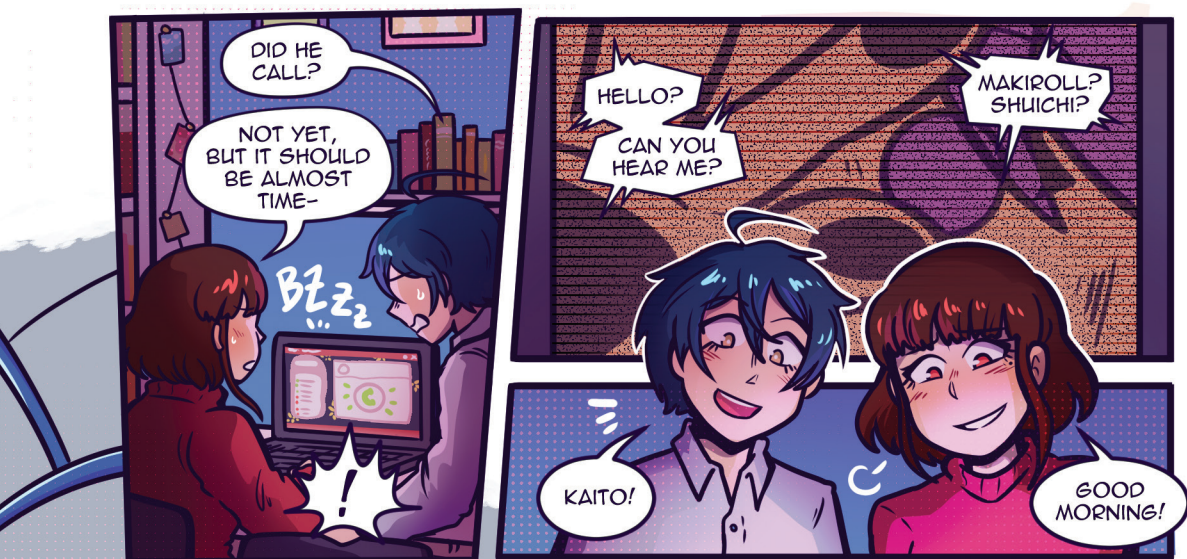
He thinks he understands one thing, though.

“Well, it’s your choice,” Shuichi says, tone mild. “But if you want to open your doors, Momota-kun... I think everyone would be happy to see you, however you are.”

Kaito’s gaze wanders, from the balloons just barely brushing the stucco ceiling, to the card still clutched firmly in his hand. He flips it over a few times, eyes tracing the signatures. Eventually, he looks up at Shuichi, a soft, sheepish grin on his face.

“You know, I wouldn’t mind seeing everybody, either.”

Shuichi sends a text, and one by one, students from Hope’s Peak trickle in to visit: laughing, joking, complaining about how worried they were. Kaito greets them all, sitting tall and proud in his hospital bed. He’s a different kind of person to all of them, but he’s always the person Shuichi cares about, every time.



Resuscitation and Other Art Forms

Written by Topher | Art by Vitalgutz

Kaito is surprised this sight isn't more familiar to him by now.

Hands clenched on grimy porcelain, head bowed so he doesn't have to look at himself in the mirror, every muscle in his body tensed and coiled as if there's actually something here for him to fight.

The only thing that's missing is the feeling of blood dripping down his chin—but no, he's even been denied that one small modicum of relief, his chest aching with a cough that isn't really there and apparently never was.

Being dead was supposed to be easier than this.

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Eating, at least, is simple.

Mindlessly trudging through the hospital buffet, loading his plate up with food in the right order, in the right portions, carrying it stiffly back to one of the neatly arranged cafeteria tables so he can shovel it into his mouth and then drag himself back to his room for a check-up or therapy or wherever it is they want to puppet him to next.

It's a little less simple choosing where to sit, which ghosts he wants to make the acquaintance of today, even if his own haunting rarely includes speaking back to them. But Ouma is chirping happily at him, his expression one of faux-nonchalance, and Akamatsu and Amami are talking about nothing of importance with mouths curved into gentle smiles, so Kaito drifts over to them and sits with no gentleness of his own.

Food is promptly shoveled, water drunk down, and all the while the TV set up in the corner drones on and on, louder than anything else in this whole damned place to Kaito's ears.

Shuichi stands tall on the screen in a way he never seemed to when Kaito was still hovering around him, haunting even back then, and Kaito feels something tighten in his chest, feels the food turn stale and drop like a stone into his stomach, feels his tongue twist itself up into knots so he can't cry out.

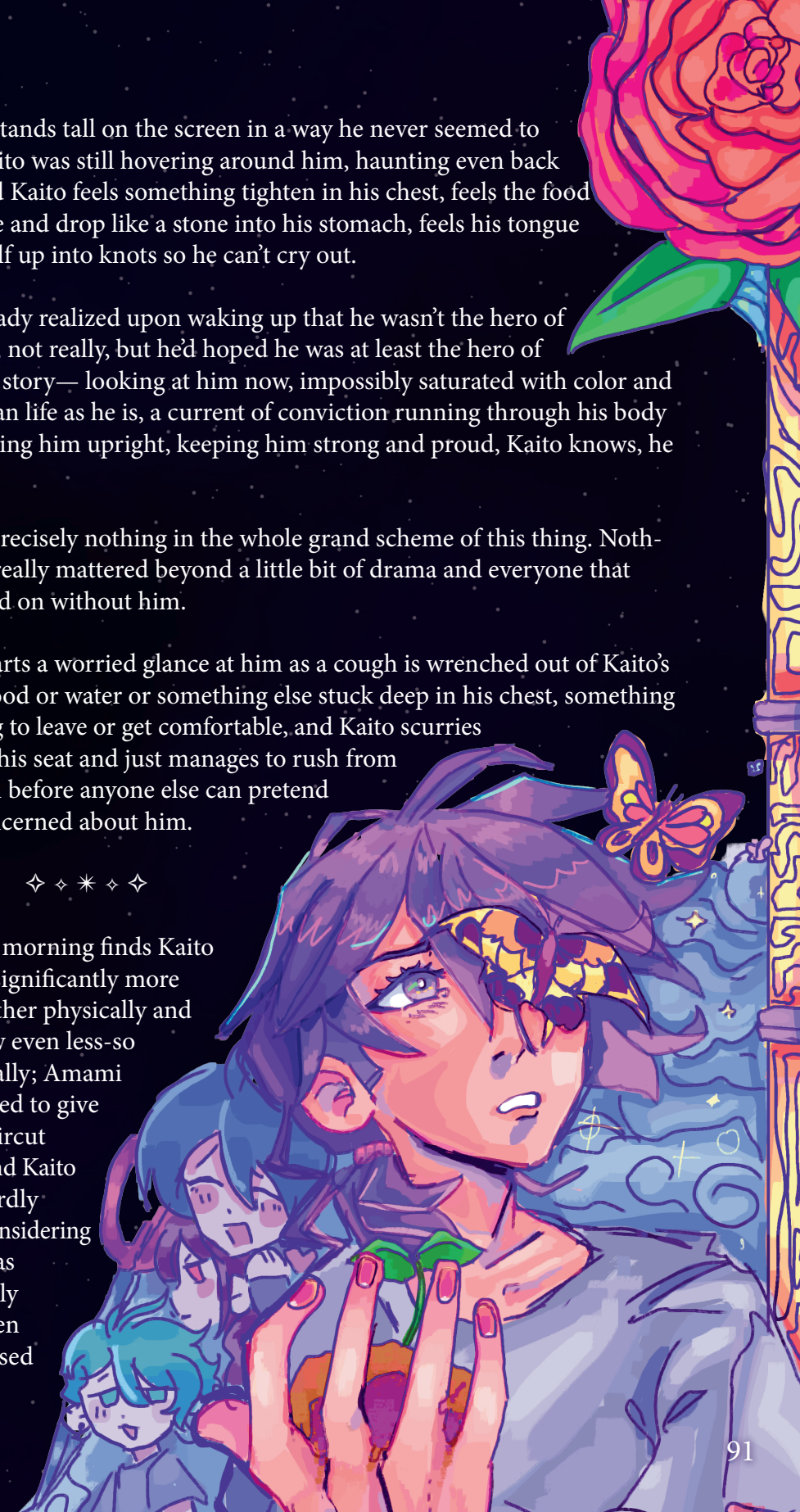
He'd already realized upon waking up that he wasn't the hero of the story, not really, but he'd hoped he was at least the hero of Shuichi's story—looking at him now, impossibly saturated with color and larger than life as he is, a current of conviction running through his body and keeping him upright, keeping him strong and proud, Kaito knows, he knows—

He was precisely nothing in the whole grand scheme of this thing. Nothing that really mattered beyond a little bit of drama and everyone that continued on without him.

Ouma darts a worried glance at him as a cough is wrenched out of Kaito's throat, food or water or something else stuck deep in his chest, something unwilling to leave or get comfortable, and Kaito scurries up from his seat and just manages to rush from the room before anyone else can pretend to be concerned about him.

◇ ◇ * ◇ ◇

The next morning finds Kaito looking significantly more put-together physically and somehow even less-so emotionally; Amami had offered to give him a haircut earlier, and Kaito could hardly refuse, considering Ouma was admittedly right when he'd accused



him of starting to resemble a caveman. As the last lock of his unkempt hair swishes down to the floor, Kaito takes in a breath and holds it just to prove to himself that he can.

It's finally time to head to the observation room to make sure season 53's survivors actually manage to wake up.

He's got enough length left to tie his hair back into a loose ponytail at the base of his neck, and he runs a hand over the odd lack of stubble on his cheeks and the even-more-noticeable absence of his goatee after he does. Ouma's comment had also led to Kaito putting in a request in the most charming tone he was capable of, and the nurses had carefully watched him take a safety razor in hand as he prepared to shave.

The labor of simply asking to do this immediately had him thinking *fuck it, the damn thing requires more maintenance than I'm willing to put up with* and shaving it all off in one fell swoop. He had no desire to have to be monitored like that more often than absolutely necessary, and besides—what's one more little change in his life.

Kaito can hear Akamatsu draw in a breath behind him as all three survivors are finally untethered from the last of the equipment that'd been keeping them under, and all that's left is to wait for them to wake on their own time. Kiibo and Shirogane, unsurprisingly, are nowhere to be found, but Kaito finds he really doesn't have the energy to stew on that particular topic for much longer than the initial realization.

Several minutes pass before Kaito watches the slow rise and fall of each chest in that room shift into something more active, more awake, and then eyes are blinking open, feet hitting the ground like that of a newborn deer. Kaito rubs his own knuckles in response to the scene absently, remembering how he himself had awoken violently and suddenly, heart beating in his ears, fists immediately swinging and hoping to connect with the nearest solid mass regardless of what it was.

Maki stands quickly, most of her grace still obviously muscle memory even in a body that's never killed before. Yumeno wobbles to her feet, looking brave despite the weakness that comes from several weeks shoved in a pod. And Shuichi—

Kaito's heart catches in his throat. Shuichi looks proud, and scared, and defiant, and as he stumbles into standing Kaito desperately wants to reach out and catch him, to hold him steady and make him smile and laugh and forget about everything wrong in this world just like he used to. Kaito wants to be held in return. He wants—he wants—

Kaito knows that the pain in his chest has nothing to do with illness by now, but his body still feels the need to reject him, to rear its head and fight back against what little he has left, and he coughs and coughs until blood speckles the floor, until he's thoroughly proven that there is no possible way to expunge the part of himself that loves too much. His vision is dotted with light and then it isn't, and the world is turned dark and terrifyingly quiet all over again.

◇ ◇ * ◇ ◇

Kaito wakes up, unsurprisingly, in a too-small hospital bed. It seems like everything's a little too-small for his body nowadays, ill-fitting and uncomfortable.

Awareness comes in phases; a soft tug against his hair as Amami braids it, the sound of Shuichi pacing, the steady drip of an IV. He stalls against opening his eyes for as long as possible, dreading the eventual realization that he is once again awake and very much not dead.

But there's light streaming into the room, and his friends—classmates—companions—are worried for him. The blinking open of his eyes is as inevitable as life itself seems to be for him.

"Momota-kun!" Shuichi exclaims as soon as he starts showing signs of awareness, walking up as close to his bed as he seems to dare. Kaito opens his mouth to speak but he feels stale all over, his body unused, shuffled about like a doll's while he'd refused to claim it himself.

"Doc wants you to take it easy," Amami murmurs, and Kaito sighs, leaning back into the pillows.

He manages a faint rasp. "Okay."

"Take as long as you need, Momota," and his eyes flicker to Maki, who

has apparently been silently stationed and hovering in the doorway, eyes cataloging exits like they usually do.

“Yes, please don’t push yourself, Momota-kun,” Shuichi still sounds nervous, but there’s something a bit more assured in his voice now, a backbone that makes Kaito smile despite himself.

He didn’t fully realize—watching them behind a screen, their bodies shallowly breathing—he didn’t realize how much he’d missed them.

He might have some thinking to do.

“Okay.”

◇ ◇ ★ ◇ ◇

When he’s well enough, the nurses let him outside into the hospital’s small garden.

He used to garden with his grandparents, in both lives—in one, it’d been a necessity, extra food to supplement what little else they could afford. In the other, it had been a bonding activity, their backyard overflowing with sunflowers and peonies.

He’d loved the act of it regardless of the reasoning, how good it felt to be productive with his hands, to nurture, to coax something into bloom and to sing to it and to be rewarded with beauty and sustenance at the end of it all.

He remembers, now, both lives—most of the others don’t, but he thinks there was a fair bit of overlap in his. Gardening, and grandparents, and fights he didn’t need to fight but wanted to win anyway. He remembers faking his identity to take an exam and he remembers his first kiss behind the brick walls of his school building, a boy trembling beneath him as scared as he was.

He remembers his audition, bold and brash and mean, played up in the desperate hopes that he’d be accepted and earn a bit of money in the process—in the hopes that maybe Danganronpa would fix him and the

body he never seemed to fit right. He remembers bruising his knuckles in-game and always wishing he hadn’t.

The cool soil feels as good between his fingers as it always had before, and with the stars glittering above, it abruptly doesn’t matter at all. How he prefers his hair long, how he’s always wanted to get his ears pierced and feel a skirt brushing against his knees. How becoming the man of the family had always felt more like a performance he had forgotten half the lines to than an actually desired achievement.

Amongst the plants and the night sky, Kaito Momota is not a hero—he is not even a man. He is just someone who loves.

◇ ◇ ★ ◇ ◇

The hospital is as lively as Kaito has ever seen it, attendants working to hand each one of them a bundle of what they came here with, some people hugging family members that have come to pick them up, others wishing each other well and exchanging phone numbers they’ve just gotten back.

It’s not as if they’re all planning to separate, but some of them are staying here for a few more weeks of recovery, and others have places to be before they can return to one another’s orbit.

Kaito is watching, amused, as Shuichi desperately tries to make sure they have the right addresses and train tickets and everything they need before they depart, while Ouma leans against him on his crutches and starts being as deliberately unhelpful as possible. And then Amami is sliding forwards and enveloping Kaito in a firmer hug than he thought the other boy capable of.

“You’ve got a month before we chase you down, got that?” he chastises, but Amami is smiling despite the firmness of his own words.

“Of course—just need some time to settle things at home first.” Kaito unintentionally starts to crumple the train ticket that will take him out into the country and back to his grandparents as his hand clenches, before he exhales and deliberately softens.

“And Shion-chan better still be in one piece when you come back!” Ouma gestures to the potted aster Kaito’s got balanced on top of his suitcase, looking comically stern.

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t need a shovel talk, Ouma,” he grins, nodding hello to Maki and Yumeno as they approach, nails painted a matching red on both of them.

“You got the paperwork?” Maki asks, feigning boredom, and Shuichi nods frantically.

“Yes, of course, and you two are right next door as requested—Ouma.” His face blanks, one eye twitching in faint irritation. “What is this?”

“Oh? You’ll need your license to check us all in, won’t you?” Shuichi’s jaw clenches and he takes in a deep breath, pocketing the *world’s first clown detective!* license that Ouma had evidently slipped into his wallet, and Kaito abruptly starts laughing, a full-bodied thing that leaves him breathless in the best way possible.

“I love you guys, okay? Don’t burn down the apartment before I can move in.”

He’s met with varying degrees of smiles from the group that’s gathered around him, a little garden of blooms and beauty and, more importantly than any of that, growth.

He has apologies to make and explanations to give before he can join them, but in a month he knows he’ll be settling his own roots down amongst them all.

Merch



Print, Sticker Sheet, & Standee by *Zipsunz*



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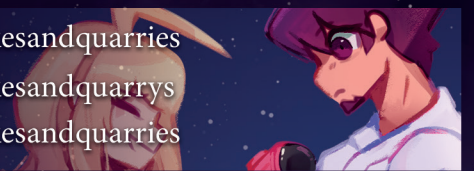
Tall Tales on the Seven Seas by Jimcloud

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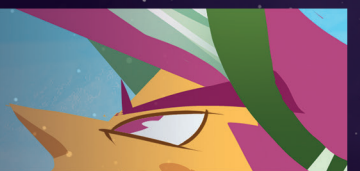
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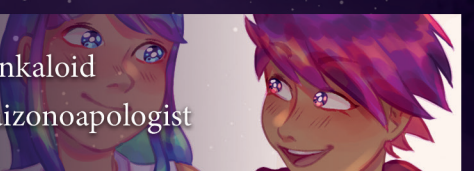
Table Setting by ToxicPineapple & Glownary

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★ toxicpineapple
★ toxicpineapple
★ glownary
★ glownary
★ glownary



Well Wishes by Mots

★ Rankaloid
★ maizonoapologist



Resuscitation and Other Art Forms by Topher

★ ktfigs
★ ktphers



Credits



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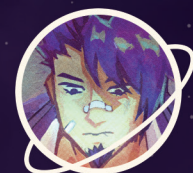
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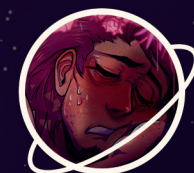
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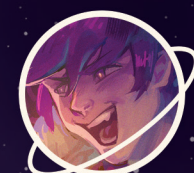
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Santan

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Chuyouout

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Hoodie

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- ✉ tori_png



Zoé P.

- ☆ puppy.au.lait



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Toxic | Social Media & Beta

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- ☆ toxicpineapple
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Catriona | Merch & Layout

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Viana | Art & Graphics

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- t vianadraws

Afterword

Thank you for supporting our zine! It's been a passion project from the beginning and we could not be more delighted to have completed it. A special thanks to our contributors, who we are beyond honoured to have worked with, and to everyone else who believed in us; we couldn't have done this without you. We'll leave you now with one final thanks and Kaito Momota's iconic catchphrase: The impossible is possible! All you gotta do is make it so.

◆ *The Luminary of the Stars Mods*